



**39**  
**SHORT**  
**STORIES**

**FOR**

**SWEET**  
**DREAMS**

Robert Burton Robinson

39 SHORT STORIES FOR  
SWEET DREAMS

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ROBERT BURTON ROBINSON



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Nightmares of a Novelist (Four Short Stories)

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# 39 SHORT STORIES FOR SWEET DREAMS

Robert Burton Robinson

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I hope you enjoy 39 Short Stories for Sweet Dreams. You'll find suspense, horror, mystery, humor, sci-fi, fantasy, crime, and adventure in these pages (approx. 86,000 words). Some of the stories might give you nightmares, so reading them at bedtime could be risky. (I was only kidding about the sweet dreams).

I have indicated the length of each story in the index as well as in the header of the story itself. Some of these babies are under 1,000 words. The longest one is nearly 18,000 words.

I began writing novels in 2006, but didn't write my first short story (Classical Revenge) until 2009. This book includes every short story I've written through June 2015.

Please visit my website ([RobertBurtonRobinson.com](http://RobertBurtonRobinson.com)) for information about me and my writing. You can also read excerpts from my novels.

Thanks for reading,

*Robert Burton Robinson*

## AMATEUR INVESTIGATOR

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A NEWBIE PRIVATE investigator learns that he just might not be cut out for this line of work. 1,479 words.

---

"I'M OUT OF HERE," said Sissy.

Paul looked up from his computer. "Where are you going dressed like that?"

She placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. "Where do you think? It's Wednesday. Girl's night out."

"Oh, yeah." His eyes went back to the computer. "Have fun."

"What are you doing—playing a game?"

"No. I'm doing research."

"Still think you're gonna be a private eye?"

"I'm already a private *investigator*." He pointed to the framed certificate on the wall.

"Is that thing even real?"

"Of course it's real."

"You paid a hundred bucks to some bogus online school. Don't you have to be licensed by the state? Who's gonna hire an *amateur* investigator?"

"I'm going to get the proper licensing."

"Whatever. Just don't quit your day job."

Paul sneered at her.

"And don't wait up."

"Bye." Maybe she was right. Even with the proper licensing, would anyone ever hire him? He made good money as a plumber. But that wasn't the point. Paul craved adventure. Danger. There's not

much excitement in cleaning the hair out of bathroom drains.

He heard the front door open.

Good. She had come back to say she was sorry. He would apologize too. No matter how much they argued, he still loved his wife.

A woman poked her head into his office. She was very attractive, wearing an evening dress, a hat and white gloves. "Sir, are you the private detective? Or do I have the wrong address?" She reached into her purse and pulled out a folded newspaper.

Oh my God, he thought. His ad had worked. "No—I mean, yes, you have the right address." He jumped up from his chair. "Paul Piper—at your service."

"Good to meet you Mr. Piper. My name is Amy. Amy Good."

"Please have a seat, Miss Good, and tell me what I can do for you."

They sat down.

"It's *Mrs.*, but you can call me Amy." She hesitated. "Is that your pickup in the driveway?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it is."

"So you're a hunter."

He gave her an inquisitive look.

"I saw the gun rack in your truck."

"Oh, right."

"I'll bet you're pretty good with a rifle."

"*He* thinks so." Paul nodded to the deer head that was mounted on the wall.

"Good—because this could be dangerous. I want to hire you to follow my husband. His name is Ben."

"You think he's cheating?"

"Yes."

"I understand. You want me to catch him in the act. Take pictures."

"My husband is a wealthy man, Mr. Piper, and I deserve half of everything he's got."

"I agree, Mrs. Good—I mean, Amy."

She reached into her purse, pulled out a photo and an envelope, and slid them across Paul's desk.

"Will you take the job?"

Paul studied the picture for a moment and then opened the envelope. It contained five one-hundred dollar bills. He nearly fell out of his chair.

"Will you take the job?"



He almost said, *Hell, yes*—but realized that would not sound professional. "Yes, Ma'am. When do I start?"

"Tonight. But be sure to take a gun. I don't know what he might do if he catches you spying on him."

Amy explained that she had overheard her husband talking to some woman on the phone. He was taking her to dinner tonight at a popular, out-of-the-way seafood restaurant on the lake. It was the same restaurant where he had taken Amy on their second date, so she knew his pattern: a great seafood dinner, followed by a long walk on the pier, a beautiful love poem, and passionate kisses under the moonlight. Then he would take her to a lovely cottage in the hills.

She told him there should be plenty of opportunities to take the pictures.

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PAUL BEGAN to wonder if he had taken a wrong turn when the long, winding paved road deteriorated into a bumpy dirt path. He was about to give up

when he spotted lights in the distance.

The parking lot was empty, and the restaurant was dark, except for the two lights above the CLOSED sign. The windows were boarded up.

Was this some kind of a joke? Had Amy Good played him for a fool? No, that didn't make sense—she had paid him five-hundred in cash.

Paul began a U-turn—but then he spotted a silver Acura. It appeared to be unoccupied. He flipped off his lights and killed the engine. Opening his door as quietly as possible, he got out of his pickup and walked over to the car with his flashlight. He compared the license plate number with the one Amy had given him. Yes, it was the husband's car.

As he walked toward the restaurant, he heard voices, and stopped dead in his tracks. Holding his breath, he listened intently. Where were the voices coming from—the restaurant? No. To his left.

Paul saw a couple at the end of the pier. They were standing very close. But it was too dark to get a good picture from this distance. He would have to get much closer, and use a flash.

But how would they react when his flash went off? The husband might run after him. Paul was not a fast runner. He imagined getting tackled, his face being pummeled, and his camera being thrown into the lake. But how else could he get the picture he needed?

What the hell? He asked for danger, and he got it.

He crept along the back edge of the pier, near the trees, so as not to be seen. He prayed a creaky board wouldn't give him away. Finally he was within flash range. He carefully took out his camera and aimed. He couldn't see their faces, but that didn't matter. He just needed to frame the shot and hold the camera steady.

He pushed the button and the end of the deck lit up momentarily and then went black. The couple turned his direction.

"Hey!" said the man.

Paul turned to run, but stopped. When the flash had illuminated the couple for that brief moment, he'd seen their faces clearly. "Sissy?"

After a two full seconds of silence, "Paul? Is that

you? What the hell are you doing out here?"

Paul took a step toward them, no longer afraid. "What happened to *Girls Night Out*, Sissy?"

"Don't you dare judge me."

"You're my wife, and you're cheating on me. You'd better damn well believe I'm gonna judge you."

There was a splash. The cheating husband had disappeared.

Paul hit the deck. He had heard the gunshot.

Sissy turned and looked over the edge of the pier. "Ben!"

Paul heard a second gunshot. Sissy flew off the pier.

Paul lay perfectly still on his stomach, shaking, until he heard a car driving away. Then he got up and went to the edge of the pier. He shined his flashlight into the water. *Some lake*—it was only three inches deep. Ben and Sissy lay face down in the mud, both of their heads oozing red liquid into the milky brown water.

The shooter must have been positioned somewhere in the parking lot, thought Paul. And

only a trained sniper could have hit their heads at that distance. But who? And why? Had to have been Amy Good, or somebody she hired. His very first client was a *crazy* woman.

He was heartbroken about losing Sissy. She would have probably left him eventually anyway. But he certainly didn't want to lose her *this* way.

But why had Amy hired him? Why did she get *him* involved?

Just as he reached his truck, two cop cars drove into the parking lot. He was about to call 911 anyway. He had nothing to hide.

The cops got out of their cars and one of them walked up to him, blinding him with his flashlight. "We got a tip about shots fired."

Before Paul could respond, the other cop shined his flashlight into Paul's truck. "Is this your rifle, Sir?"

"Uh, yes, Sir."

"Fired it lately?"

"No." He had brought it with him because Amy told him he should carry a gun in case her husband got violent.

The cop open the passenger door and took the gun off the rack. "It's still warm."

"What have you been shooting at, Sir?"

"Nothing."

One cop began reading him his rights as the other one cuffed him.

His cheating wife and her boyfriend had been murdered with *his* rifle. There was nobody else within miles. Mrs. *Good*, or whoever she'd hired, had undoubtedly worn gloves while using *his* rifle. She had also worn gloves in his office—and paid him in cash. He had no proof that he'd ever even met her.

Paul Piper, Amateur Investigator. What was he thinking? Why couldn't he have been happy as a plumber?

In one night, he had graduated from amateur investigator...to professional stooge.

THE END



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## BLIND DATE IN OUTER SPACE

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TWO VERY BRIGHT TEENAGERS, Riley and Rachel, who are thrust into a treacherous situation by a reclusive, dying scientist. In a last ditch effort to validate the capabilities of his cutting-edge inventions, Doc Himmel uses the teens as guinea pigs, sending them to a planet that's light years away from Earth.

Their mission is to gather data about the planet Sorella Uno and somehow survive until he brings them back to Earth. He has equipped the teens with

slightly different bodies so they can fit in with the planet's inhabitants. But it may take a while for Riley and Rachel to adapt to having extra arms.

However, that's the least of their worries because even if they manage to stay alive long enough to complete their mission, there may be no way to return to Earth.

17,784 words.

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FOURTEEN YEAR-OLD RILEY RANGLE told his mom he was going to Jake's house to shoot hoops. He couldn't tell her the truth. She never would have allowed him to go to crazy old Doc Himmel's house. And Riley had never wanted to go near the creepy-looking place until now.

He'd never met the man, or even seen a picture of him. But he'd heard the stories. Years ago, Hilbert Himmel, a dentist, who was surprisingly also a chiropractor, claimed he could cure just about any medical condition by working on your teeth and gums. But if that didn't do the trick, he'd lay you out

on his chiropractic table and start popping your bones. His last resort was to inject you with some voodoo concoction he'd mixed up in his lab.

Most people thought Doc Himmel was a quack—yet he'd stayed in business for nearly forty years. Obviously, a lot of people believed in his strange methods of doctoring.

Riley didn't know what to believe. After the doctor retired twenty years ago, he became a hermit. Nobody had any idea what the crazy old man was doing alone in that big house.

But Riley was about to find out.

His property occupied a huge corner lot, bordered on the back and sides by an eight-foot iron fence. In the front was a large pond that provided twenty-five feet of separation from the street. It was like a moat, protecting the castle from the king's enemies. But there was no drawbridge—just a wooden bridge that looked like it might collapse if you were foolish enough to try to walk across it.

Riley paused. Was he really going to do this? He instinctively reached for his phone. Why? To check with his mommy? He was not a kid anymore. At

fourteen, Riley was well on his way to becoming a man.

He wished he could have called Doc Himmel and talked to him about this. Maybe that would have reassured him. But Riley didn't have his phone number, and he wasn't even sure he had the correct email address. When he'd replied to the doctor's email, it had bounced.

Maybe this was a prank, and he'd being an idiot for taking it seriously. Some buttheads from his school were probably hiding in the bushes, capturing his gullibility on video for all the world to see.

Riley decided to put those thoughts out of his mind. Dr. Himmel had emailed him about some cool inventions the doctor was working on. He said he'd read about Riley's science fair project, and how it had won first place in the national competition. According to his email, Riley was just the kind of smart young man with whom the doctor wanted to share his amazing inventions—that had something to do with space travel. Riley would be the first one to see them.

He took one step onto the bridge and it creaked. With the second step, it began to sway slightly. What was the worst thing that could happen? The bridge might collapse and dump Riley into the water. So what? He would swim to the other side, climb up to the grass, and run to the front door. The doctor would commend him for his bravery, and offer him a towel and a change of clothes.

Riley took another step. The board under his foot felt spongy. Could it hold his weight? He took a deep breath. Don't be a wimp—be a warrior. He charged forward at full speed, knowing he was putting more stress on the old bridge by running, but he couldn't stand the suspense. If it meant he would fall into the water, so be it. An image flashed across his mind: dozens of snakes wrapped around his arms and legs, pulling him under—to a harrowing watery death.

When he was nearly to the other side, a board cracked and his leg fell through, stopping him dead in his tracks. The bridge swayed from side to side, creaking and popping. He held his breath and carefully pulled his leg out of the gap. Riley tiptoed

the rest of the way across the bridge, and rolled onto the grass.

He breathed a sighed of relief. Home free and bone dry. He jumped up and ran to the front door.

The two carriage lamps at either side of the door were covered with spiderwebs, and projected monster-sized spider shadows onto the enormous front door. Riley knocked. The wooden door felt like concrete, as though it were petrified.

If the email was real, this was gonna be cool. But if it was a joke—if some clown from school had set him up—the old doctor might yell at him or call the police or pull out a shotgun. But he'd been well aware of the dangers when he'd lied to his mom. The best case scenario would leave him grounded for two weeks after witnessing some amazing, cutting-edge technology. Totally worth it.

The worst case—

The hinges groaned as the door opened. The man was tall—well over six feet—with a full head of gray hair, down to his shoulders. If this was Doctor Himmel, then Riley had to agree: he did look crazy—more like a wino than an inventor.



“Hello, Riley.” His booming, crackling voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a barrel that hadn’t been opened in fifty years. It was the lowest-pitched voice Riley had ever heard, delivered in syrupy-slow motion. It was as if the doctor’s words had been recorded earlier and were playing back at a much slower speed.

Riley shivered. It freaked him out that this weird-looking old man had just called him by name. Apparently the email had been real, but now Riley kinda wished it hadn’t. He quickly calculated that he could make it to the street in thirty seconds—assuming the bridge didn’t crumble under his feet.

“I’m Dr. Himmel. Come in, son.” He pulled the door open farther.

“Good to meet you, Dr. Himmel.”

“You can call me Doc. That’s what my patients always called me.”

Riley walked into the foyer. “Okay, Doc. Thanks for inviting me.” When he got a good whiff of the place, he nearly gagged. It smelled like mildewed tennis shoes filled with rotten banana peels, covered with cigarette ashes.

Doc closed the door. "You know I picked you because of your science fair project. That was good, solid work you did with that robot."

"Thanks. I plan on winning first prize again next year."

"Not if I can help it." Rachel Oliver was standing at the other end of the foyer.

"What are you doing here?" Riley asked.

"I invited Rachel too," Doc said. "She got here a little early."

"We don't need her, Doc," Riley said. "Her science fair project came in a distant second."

"The judges screwed up," she said. "My robot ran circles around yours."

"That's about all it could do—run in circles," Riley said. "Besides, you wrote your controller application in Java, so most of the work was already done for you. All you had to do was plug in a few lines of code. I created my own programming language from scratch."

"Which was a complete waste of time," she said. "How are we supposed to make any real progress as scientists if we keep reinventing the wheel? Right,

Doc?"

Before he could speak, Riley said, "My code is highly sophisticated—unlike yours."

"So said the judges," Rachel said.

"Then we're in agreement," Riley said.

"No, we're not, because when the judges awarded you first prize they judged themselves to be inferior," she said.

Riley looked at Doc. "That is so bogus."

Rachel got in Riley's face. "Why don't we borrow one of Doc's computer and show him our code. Let him decide who's is better?"

"Stop!" Doc's booming voice shook the walls.

Riley and Rachel froze.

"I don't have time for this bickering," Doc said. "I selected both of you for a reason. Now, follow me."

He turned and walked out of the foyer.

Rachel stuck out her tongue at Riley.

He responded with a conceited grin.

They followed Doc through the living room. The coffee table was covered with dust and the couch and chairs looked like they hadn't been touched in

years. Then they went down a long hallway and through a door that led into what must have been the doctor's dental office at one time. The room was so bright that Riley had to squint for a few moments until his pupils adjusted.

There were several dentist chairs in a row, bolted to the floor. Only remnants remained of the inner walls that had at one time partitioned the large room into patient stalls.

"This is my lab," Doc said.

To the left, in a corner was a heavy-looking metal desk with a computer workstation on it. Riley recognized it as an old DEC Alpha workstation from the 1990s. "You running UNIX, Doc?" Riley asked, before Rachel had a chance.

"Yes, sir."

"Programming in C?" Riley asked.

"No, I use my own language that's built on top of C." Doc said.

Riley smirked at Rachel. "See? Doc doesn't use Java either."

"Okay," Doc said, "I'm gonna show you a video that demonstrates my advanced 3D scanner and 3D

printer.”

“I know all about 3D scanners and printers, Doc,” Rachel said.

Doc gave her a cold stare. “You’ve never seen one like this.”

“You mean you brought us here just to show us a video?” she asked.

“You could have just emailed us the video, Doc,” Riley said.

Doctor Himmel’s face turned red. “I’m not gonna take a chance on my inventions getting out there on the web where idiots can scrutinize them and criticize me. The scientific community rejected my ideas twenty years ago, and I am about to make them choke on their own superiority complex. But not until I’m ready.” He started coughing, and quickly went into a full-blown coughing fit.

By the time he finally he got it under control, his eyes were red and watery. “Whew, that was a rough one.”

“Are you sick?” Rachel asked.

“No,” Doc said. “I’m dying. Lung cancer. Cigarettes. Four packs a day for seventy years.”

Riley didn't know what to say.

Doc went on. "So, I haven't got much time left. But, hell, I'm 87 years old, so I can't complain. Never thought I'd live this long. But while I'm still kicking, I'm gonna push my new technology to limit, and with your help, prove that it works. I'll show those dumbasses. It'll literally blow their pants off." He grinned.

Riley wondered how he and Rachel were going to help Doc prove anything by simply watching a video.

"Before I show you the video...follow me." Doc took them outside and down a sidewalk that led to what appeared to be a large warehouse. Inside, the only source of light came from a small lamp sitting next to a computer workstation on a desk.

"Aren't you gonna turn on the lights?" Rachel asked.

Her voice echoed, leading Riley to surmise that there were no inner walls in the building—no division of the space into smaller rooms—just one big, open area with little or nothing in it. But as he stared into the darkness, he thought he could see a



large object in the middle of the room. Perhaps it just the afterimage of a dental chair, temporarily burned into his retina during their brief visit to the Doc's bright lab.

Doc walked over to the computer, logged in, entered a few keystrokes, and the entire room lit up. A very large, open-ended glass tube was pointed at the ceiling. It was ten feet tall and at least twelve inches in diameter. The bottom of the tube was mounted to a huge metal apparatus covered with electric cables.

"Is that a laser?" Riley asked.

"An extremely powerful laser," Doc said, still typing at the keyboard. "I'm way ahead of NASA."

NASA? Riley remembered reading that NASA scientists had built a high-powered laser that could transmit data to and from the moon at super-fast speeds.

The roof opened to a clear sky.

"Nice," Rachel said.

Riley pointed. "There's Alpha Centauri."

"How would you like to go there?" Doc asked.

Riley whipped around. "What do you talking

about?"

"Well, not to Alpha Centauri specifically," Doc said. "Let's go back inside."

"Aren't you gonna tell us what you do with this laser?" Rachel asked.

"Inside." Doc walked toward the door.

"Don't you need to close the roof?" Rachel asked. "What if it rains?"

Doc ignored her.

They followed him back into the lab.

"Have a seat," Doc said, offering two of the dentist chairs.

Riley and Rachel sat down in the chairs.

Rachel looked nervous.

"You're not gonna drill our teeth, are you, Doc?" Riley said, trying to lighten the mood.

Doc stood in front of them holding what appeared to be a custom remote control. "My advanced 3D reproduction technology is like nothing you've ever seen. It can reproduce about anything—including the human body."

"You're joking," Rachel said.

Doc touched the remote, and the wall became a

video screen. He stepped aside as the video began to play.

In the video, Doc Himmel was sitting in a dental chair. In a second dental chair that was facing his, a copy of Doc's body began to gradually appear.

"So, the copy of you being produced by your 3D printer?" Riley asked. "This can't be real."

"Quiet!" Doc said.

When the copy was fully formed, it opened its eyes and saw Doc sitting across from it. "Who are you?" It asked.

"I am the original," Doc said. "I'm the real you. You're just a copy."

"That's impossible." The copy slid out of its chair and stood up.

Doc clicked the remote, which paused the video.

"What are you doing?" Riley said. "It was just getting good."

"No," Doc said. "That's when it got bad."

"What happened?" Riley asked.

"He died," Doc said.

Riley looked around. "What did you do with his body?"

“I buried it in the back yard,” Doc said.

“He died?” Rachel asked. “No, you killed him. You pulled the plug on him, didn’t you? How could you do that? He was walking and talking. He was real. He was you.”

Riley said, “Doc, you could have manipulated the data inside your 3D system and removed your cancer before you made the copy.”

“Yes,” Doc said. “I could have.”

“Then why not do it?” Riley asked. “Then you could go on living—as the copy.”

“It’s not that simple,” Doc said.

Yeah, Riley thought, because the video was a fake. None of this is real. Doc was delusional.

Doc said, “The enormous laser I showed you a few minutes ago is part of my high-speed digital, Full-Duplex, Laser Communication System, or FuddleCuz, as I call it.”

“FuddleCuz?” Rachel asked. “Why do you call it that?”

Riley jumped in. “Because that’s what scientists do with acronyms, Rachel—they make them into funny words so it’s easier to say them and

remember them. The acronym for Full-Duplex, Laser Communication System is F D L C S, which Doc has turned into FuddleCuz. Get it?"

"Yeah, sure." Rachel smirked at him, probably wondering why Riley was still playing along with Dr. Nutcase.

"Very good, Riley," Doc said. "So, once the 3D scanner has created a digital copy of the subject, the FuddleCuz can send that data to another planet and—"

"Another planet?" Riley asked. "But that would take years."

Doc grinned. "When I say high-speed, I'm talking about speeds you've never even dreamed of, son. A few minutes ago, you looked into the sky and pointed to Alpha Centauri. How long do you think it would take for the FuddleCuz to transmit to that star system? Take a guess."

"Are you kidding?" Riley asked. "Alpha Centauri is 4.37 light years away."

"That is exactly right," Doc said, "but you haven't answered my question."

Rachel piped in. "The fastest speed I've ever

heard of would get you there in about 85 years or so. But that was just theoretical stuff.”

“Yeah,” Riley said, “using the best technology we’ve got right now, it would take something like 80,000 years.”

“Correct,” Doc said, “which is why my system is such a breakthrough. Of course, in fairness, I’m not sending up a physical spaceship. The FuddleCuz only transmits the data needed to make a copy of the subject.”

“And how many years does that take?” Riley asked.

“It can reach Alpha Centauri in approximately ten minutes,” Doc said.

Riley now knew for sure that Doctor Himmel was completely out of his mind.

“That’s impossible,” Rachel said.

Doc smiled. “No, dear, it is not impossible. I’ve already done it. Actually, I blew right past Alpha Centauri because it’s way too hot for mammals: about 1200 degrees Celsius.”

“I’m sorry, Doc,” Riley said, “but do you realize how crazy that sounds?”

Doc walked over to a metal cabinet and took out something that looked like a bowling ball. "This is another one of my inventions: the Auto-Maneuverable Camera Ball."

"So, what's your cute name for it?" Rachel asked.

"I just call it the camera ball," Doc said.

"So, it takes pictures while it's rolling around?" Riley asked.

"Right," Doc said. "But it does a lot more than that. It can travel at speeds of up to sixty miles per hour. It can traverse mountains. Leap over obstacles. And it even has a stealth mode."

Yeah, right. Riley was beginning to wonder if this was even the real Doc Himmel. Maybe he'd died several years ago, and now Ashton Kutcher was using this place to punk nerds like him and Rachel.

Rachel cocked her head. "That ball can turn completely invisible?"

"Very close," Doc said. "I send it to other planets and let it take pictures and videos, and transmit them back to me through the FuddleCuz."

"So, you've tested it?" Rachel asked. "Where's

the video? I've got to see this."

Doc ignored her questions. "There are more than eight billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy that may be capable of supporting human life. I have selected seven of them to investigate."

"But even if you can transmit to another planet at ridiculously high speeds, what are you transmitting to? Riley asked. "How do you get a receiver and a 3D printer to that planet?"

Doc grinned. "That, son, is the most amazing aspect of this whole thing. But, unfortunately, I don't have time to explain it right now." He pressed a button on his remote.

Rachel screamed.

"Shit!" Riley felt his body being sucked down tight against the padding of the chair. He couldn't pull away from the armrests, and his legs were glued to the leg rest. "What are you doing to us, Doc?"

"Let me out of this thing!" Rachel said.

"Sorry to bring you two here under false pretenses," Doc said. "But I'm dying fast, and before I kick the bucket, I've gotta prove that my system is



capable of sending humans to another planet.”

“Wait,” Riley said. “You just said you wanted to prove you could send humans to another planet. But you meant copies, right? You’re trying to prove you can send copies of humans.”

“Sure, that’s what I meant, of course,” Doc said.

“I don’t want to do this,” Rachel said. “Let me go.”

“You kids should be proud,” Doc said. “Out of everyone in the city, I chose you two because I was impressed with your intelligence and your ingenuity.”

“I’m not really that bright,” Rachel said. “I lucked out when I won second place in the science fair. You need to let me go and find somebody smarter.”

“This could be dangerous,” Riley said. “Your crazy invention could kill us.”

“Crazy invention?” Doc got up in Riley’s face. “You’re calling my life’s work crazy? Do you have any idea how many years I’ve been developing this system? How many sleepless nights?” He began to cough violently and stumbled away from Riley.

“You need to see a doctor about that cough,” Riley said. “Let us take you to the hospital.”

Doc reached into this pocket, pulled out a pack of Marlboros, put one between his lips, and lit it.

“What’s holding us to these chairs?” Rachel asked. “It feels like I’m magnetized.”

“You are,” Doc said. “That’s another one of my inventions.”

“I don’t like,” Rachel said. “It feels weird.”

“It won’t hurt you though,” Doc said.

“Well, you’re obviously a brilliant man,” Riley said. “I have no doubt about that. But if you run this experiment on us and something goes wrong, we could die. And then you’d go to prison.”

“Or, even if your experiment does work, you could die in the middle of it and leave us stuck on some strange planet forever,” Rachel said.

“Well, remember, I’ll only be sending a copy of you through space. The original you will still be sitting here in the chair.”

“So, once you send our copies you can let us go home,” Riley said.

“I’m afraid not,” Doc said. “You see, the trickiest

part about making copies of the human body is the brain. The copies that my system produces are not exact copies—I've still got a few bugs to work out—but they're close. They're functional. Except for the brain."

"Then what's the point? How do you expect our copies to do anything without brains?" Riley asked. "Let us go until you work that out. Then we'll come back."

"Right, sure you will." Doc coughed. "No, I'll be dead by then. Besides, I have a workaround for the brain problem. You saw it demonstrated in the video. What I do is borrow part of the brain from the original to use in the copy."

"Borrow it?" Riley asked. "You're gonna take out part of our brains?"

"You're a monster!" Rachel said.

"The process removes a portion of your brain and puts it in the copy. And then, after the experiment is complete, your brain will be restored one-hundred percent," Doc said.

"And if you die," Rachel said, "before you restore our brains—"

“That won’t happen,” Doc said, “because I’ve taken the precaution of installing a countdown timer to automatically retrieve your brains and restore them in case I die before I can bring them back manually.”

“Please don’t do this to us,” Rachel said.

“What if something goes wrong and our brains get lost somewhere out there in space?” Riley asked. “Then we’re screwed. We’ll be left with half a brain—or maybe we’ll be stuck in a coma. What will you do then—bury us in your backyard cemetery?”

“Your brains are my number one concern,” Doc said, “because without them, the copies will be useless.”

“Really?” Rachel asked. “That’s your number one concern? Not the fact that you’re probably gonna kill us?”

“It will all work out,” Doc said. “Now, you can either shut up and let me explain a few things, or go in blind. What will it be?”

“I want to go home.” Rachel began to tear up.

“Okay, then, blind it is.” Doc walked toward his computer.

“No, wait!” Riley said. “Please explain it to us. We want to hear everything, right, Rachel?”

Rachel nodded.

“Good,” Doc said. “The planet I’m sending you to has a climate that’s almost identical to Earth’s. It’s populated with intelligent mammals, with a civilization somewhat similar to ours. Your mission is to blend in and learn as much as you can. According to the data that was sent back by the camera ball, their technology appears to be somewhat more advanced than our own. I’m sure you two will enjoy that aspect of it.”

“But we won’t be there,” Riley said. “It’ll just be our copies, right?”

“Yes, but your copies will be using your brains, so I expect that it will feel like you’re actually there,” Doc said.

“But how will our copies communicate with the people, or whatever they are?” Rachel asked.

“Not a problem,” Doc said. “I’ll get to that momentarily.”

“What do they look like?” Riley said.

“Surprisingly similar to humans,” Doc said.

“And the copies of your bodies will be altered to look just like theirs. I want you to learn everything you can about the them and their technology, their politics—assuming they have such a thing, and—”

“Whatever we can pick up in a couple of hours?” Rachel asked.

“It’ll take a little longer than that,” Doc said.

“How much longer?” Riley asked.

“I’ll be watching the data as it comes in,” Doc said. “Everything you see, say, and do will be recorded and transmitted back to me.”

“How?” Riley asked.

“Our copies will automatically send the data back?” Rachel asked.

“Because you’re adding that functionality to our copies?” Riley asked.

“No,” Doc said. “It’s easier to add it to the originals.” He walked over to a metal cabinet, opened the door, and took out two large syringes.

“What the hell are those?” Riley asked.

“What are you gonna to do to us?” Rachel said. “I know you’re not worried about going to prison, but don’t you have a conscience? Please, stop and

think about what you're doing."

Doc set one of the syringes down on the table and walked to Riley's chair. "This is going to sting a little." He pressed down on Riley's forehead to hold his head in place.

Riley said, "Stop!"

Doc injected the syringe into the side of Riley's neck, just below the skull.

Riley said, "Dammit!"

Doc said, "The chip is designed to do two things: send data to the FuddleCuz, which will, in turn, relay it back to me; and translate other languages into English for you. It will also translate what you want to say into the foreign language and your mouth will automatically speak in that language."

He put Riley's syringe on the table and picked up the other one.

"You don't need to send two people," Rachel said. "Just send Riley. He's smarter than me anyway."

"Don't be so modest, my dear."

She began to sob. "Please..."

Doc held her head and injected the chip into her

neck.

“You bastard!” She said.

“Okay, good,” Doc said. “Now, you’re all ready to go.” He put the syringe down, walked over to his computer, and sat down.

“Wait,” Riley said, “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Doc said, typing at his keyboard.

“Yes, it will, damn it,” Riley said. “I’m about to piss my pants.”

Doc continued to type. “That’s okay. The seat is waterproof.” He laughed. “Okay, here we go.”

Riley held his breath, waiting for the inevitable vibration or jolt or disintegration of his body. “Nothing’s happening.”

“Thank God,” Rachel said.

“You’re wrong,” Doc said. “It’s happening right now. You’re both being scanned. Soon your copies will be on their way to the planet Sorella Uno.”

“Where’s that?” Rachel said.

“Never heard of it,” Riley said.

“I named it myself,” Doc said. “It means Sister



One.”

“This is ridiculous,” Riley said. Obviously Doc’s system was a dud, so he would release them and let them go home. But what the hell had he injected into their necks? They would need to get to a doctor as soon as possible and have it removed. But the very first thing Riley would do was call 9-1-1 and report this lunatic so they could haul him off to the funny farm.

Doc entered a few more keystrokes. “Now I’m initiating the brain procurement process...”

The back of Riley’s head slammed into the head rest—apparently now magnetized to the chair like the rest of his body. “Stop! I want out of this thing!”

“Just relax,” Doc said.

“It feels like you’re sucking my brains out!” Rachel said.

“And remember,” Doc said, “your copies will look a little different—so that you can blend in. It could be rather disconcerting at first, but you’ll get used to your new bodies quickly enough.”

“It’s not working, Doc,” Riley said. “You must still have a few glitches in your system.” Riley’s

head began to buzz.

Rachel said, "I feel sick."

"Me too," Riley felt vomit coming up the back of his throat.

Everything went black.

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DOC HIMMEL STUDIED RILEY, who was sitting motionless in the dental chair. He looked wide-awake, but nobody was home. Doc lowered the boy's eyelids and checked his pulse. It was strong and stable. Riley had been left with just enough brain power to keep his body functioning in a coma-like state.

He went to Rachel's chair and checked her. She was doing fine as well.

The doctor walked over to his computer workstation and sat down. It would be another twenty minutes or so before Riley and Rachel's copies were created on the distant planet, Sorella Uno. Then it would take ten more minutes for him to receive confirmation. Doc felt certain that

everything would go smoothly this time. He was convinced that he'd finally removed all the bugs from his system.

He had implied to Riley and Rachel that they would be participating in the first human trial. But that was not true. This was actually the ninth attempt. During his most recent trial, a minor coding error had caused a freakish reproduction: feet attached at the wrong end of the legs. How could he have made such a careless mistake? Another coding error had resulted in the boy's brain getting fried on its way back to Earth. But he was a runaway kid, like most of Doc's subjects, so nobody would come looking for him—at least not anytime soon.

How many more bodies was he going to have to bury in the back yard? Doc was beginning to feel like a mortician.

He coughed hard, and heaved up a gob of phlegm and spit it into the trash can beside his desk. The next cough produced blood. Only one thing would stop the coughing. He lit up another cigarette and glanced over at Riley and Rachel.

It was going to work this time. Those two were

gonna make it. They had to. He was running out of time.

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RILEY'S EYES opened to an orange and maroon sky with three suns. He was flat on his back and had no idea where he was. The last thing he remembered was being in Doc Himmel's lab, magnetized to an old dental chair. He sat up and saw Rachel a few yards away, lying in the grass.

Two arms suddenly wrapped around his waist from behind. "Hey!" Riley looked back, but didn't see anyone. He tried to pull the arms loose, but they were latched on tight, so he got up and ran around like a maniac and then flopped down and rolled wildly in the grass, and came to an abrupt stop, face down, on top of a mound. He opened his dizzy eyes and realized that was lying on top of Rachel. His head was nestled between her breasts.

Rachel's eyes popped open. "Get off of me!" She pushed him to the side.

"Take it easy," Riley said. "I wasn't trying to

make a move on you.” He stood up.

“Look out!” she said. “Somebody’s behind you!”

Riley spun around, but didn’t see anyone.

“Oh, my God,” Rachel said.

“What? What?” Riley rotated frantically.

“Nobody’s there.”

Riley stopped spinning.

“It’s you,” she said. “You’ve got four arms.”

Riley looked down. “What the hell?” The arms that were still wrapped tight around his waist were his own. His body had two extra arms, attached at the hips.

“No, no, no. This is icky weird.” Rachel stood up. “I’ve got them too.” She held out her four arms and started crying. “What happened to us?”

“Doc did this,” Riley said. “I’m gonna kill that bastard.” With his upper hands, he released the lower arms from his waist and began flailing them, as though he could fling off the unwanted appendages.

“It’s no use. We’re stuck with these things.” Rachel began to regain her composure. “Doc’s experiment must have worked.” She looked around

and then gazed at the sky. "Because I don't think this is Earth."

"You really believe he made copies of us and zapped us onto some distant planet? No, it's got to be a trick. He probably put us into some kind of dream state. Although, I've never had a dream that seemed so real."

"And I've never had a dream with you in it," she said.

Riley didn't respond.

"I feel lighter," she said. "Maybe this planet has less gravitational pull than Earth." She jumped up six feet off the ground before coming back down and landing gently. "Whoa."

"We've got to be dreaming. But hey, I guess we might as well enjoy the dream." Riley jumped even higher than Rachel had. "This is nuts." When his feet touched down, he said, "And you know what else? I feel taller."

"I think we are taller."

"And it's a good thing, because otherwise our lower hands would be dragging the ground." He walked around in a circle with his arms dangling at

his sides. "This looks ridiculous. I feel like a gorilla."

"A gorilla with four arms," she said.

"Doc really screwed us up."

"Well, it could be worse. At least we don't have two heads."

Rachel examined the white jumpsuit and shoes she was wearing.

Riley's outfit was similar, but in black. He bent down to check out his shoes. "These shoes feel like gummy bears. They're comfortable."

"I wish Doc had given us better clothes," she said.

"I guess it's hard to shop for people with four arms though."

Rachel giggled. "I suppose we should just be thankful we have something to wear," she said. "I didn't really think his experiment was gonna work, but if it did—I was afraid we'd be naked."

"Hmm." Riley grinned as he gave her the once-over.

"Quit looking at me like that."

"I was just thinking that these extra arms could come in handy." He walked toward her with his

four arms extended. "How about a hug?"

She held up her four fists and sneered at him.

Riley put his arms down. "So, even in my dreams I get rejected."

"What's the matter with you? Why are you acting so weird?"

"I guess it's because I can't believe this is real. Maybe it's the difference in the gravitational pull. I may be kinda light-headed. Or Doc might have scrambled our brains a little. He said he was only sending part of our brains."

"Well, mine's working just fine," she said.

Riley looked up at the sky. "Is it just me or is it getting darker?"

"It's definitely getting darker." She pointed to the suns. "All three of those suns are going down fast. We'd better look for shelter. Who knows what kind of creatures may come out at night."

"Yeah, and we don't know what will happen to the temperature. Right now it feels like seventy degrees. But nightfall could put us below freezing, for all we know."

Riley heard a humming noise and ducked.



Something silver and very large flew over their heads at a low altitude.

“Was that a plane?” he asked.

“It was moving so fast that I didn’t get a good look at it.”

“Flying that low—it was probably about to land. I think we should go the direction the plane went. There’s probably a city over there.”

“That makes sense,” she said.

They started walking.

Riley said, “Hey, I wonder if we could get there faster if we got down on all six and ran?”

“All six? Funny.”

“Okay, even if this isn’t a dream, are we really copies?” he asked. “I mean, how could that be? I feel like myself—except for these extra arms.”

“And being lighter and taller.”

“Yeah. Hey, I wonder how far we could jump with a running start?” He took off.

“Wait for me.” She ran after him.

“Wow,” he said, “I must be doing twenty miles per hour. I’ve never run this fast.”

Rachel ran up alongside him. “This is amazing.”

“Now, for a jump.” Riley leaped into the air and landed fifty feet away and continued to run. Then he slowed to a stop and turned around to watch Rachel.

“I’m coming!” She jumped nearly as far as Riley had and then ran up to him and stopped. “Imagine what we could do if Doc had given us wings.”

“I do not want wings.” Riley looked up at the sky. “Can you hear me, Doc? Do not give us wings. And I don’t want these freakish extra arms either.”

“He can’t hear you.”

“I know he can’t hear me now,” he said, “because there’s a delay. But in ten minutes he’ll get the message—assuming everything works the way he claimed it would.”

“So, he’s gonna hear and see everything we do?”

“Supposedly. He might even be able to tell what we’re thinking.”

“No, don’t say that,” she said. “That would make me crazy. If it’s true, then I don’t want to know it. And I can pretend I don’t know it if you quit talking about it.”

“Yeah, that is creepy.”

They started walking.

“Wonder how long Doc is gonna leave us here?” she asked.

“Until we’ve spent enough time mixing in with whatever weird humanoids are living on this rock—at least, that’s what he said.”

“But what if something goes wrong?” she asked. “What if...we die here? Does that mean Doc can’t bring us back? If our copies die, do we die too?”

“He didn’t say.”

“And how do we know he wasn’t lying about bringing us back?” she asked. “He tricked us into coming to his house. Maybe once he’s got all the data he wants, he’ll just pull the plug and leave us here forever.”

“But we’re just the copies, remember?”

“Yeah, but we’re using part of our real brain according to Doc.”

“We must be using most of our brains,” Riley said. “How else could we be functioning normally like this?”

“So, if we die here, our real bodies will never get their full brains back,” she said.

“I don’t even want to think about that.”

“It’s getting dark. But I can see lights over there.”

“Yeah,” he said. “So, at least we’re headed in the right direction. But we need hurry up and get there while we still have enough light to see where we’re going. So, let’s make like kangaroos and get hopping.”

---

RILEY AND RACHEL had been running and jumping and hopping toward the light for two minutes when Rachel began to slow down, and said, “Stop. I need a break.”

Riley tried to halt abruptly, which sent him into multiple cartwheels before he landed face down in the grass.

Rachel ran to check on him. “You okay?”

Without moving, Riley said, “I’m fine. Just resting.”

“Wish we had flashlights. It’s about to be black out here.”

“Yeah, and the temperature’s dropping fast.”

Rachel didn’t respond.

“Don’t you think?” Riley rolled over and saw Rachel standing over him. “Rachel?”

She stood frozen in place.

He got up. “What are you doing?” He stepped in close to her. “Hello? This is not funny, Rachel.” He waved a hand in front of her face, but she didn’t move or even blink.

No human could stand so perfectly still. But, of course, she wasn’t human. Neither was he. They were copies of humans. Was this a hiccup in Doc’s technology—something that would clear up within a few seconds? Or...maybe this was how people died on this planet—going along, living their lives like everything was fine and then, without warning, turning into statues.

No, she couldn’t be dead. No, no, no. Maybe she just needed a reboot—something to jolt her system. He stepped in close, put all four of his arms around her, pressed his body against hers, and kissed her on the lips. This should do it. Riley kept his eyes open so he could see her reaction. Her lips were warm and her body felt wonderful. She was definitely not dead. He would keep holding her and kissing her

until she—

His body froze—as though he'd instantly caught whatever had infected Rachel. But he wasn't unconscious and he wasn't cold. Even though he couldn't move, he could still feel Rachel's lips. Sense the warm titillation of her body. They were both hot from all the running and jumping. He could smell her sweaty face against his nose. Riley had never imagined that a whiff of perspiration could be tantalizing. He wanted to lick it off her face. God! I'm such a pig!

He could see her eyes. Her beautiful green eyes. He wondered if it was the same for her. Was she seeing him, feeling him?

Riley had been so busy competing with Rachel that he hadn't allowed himself to see how pretty she was. Suddenly, he was very attracted to her—four arms and all. Although, he doubted that she felt the same toward him. He wondered what she was thinking at this very moment. Probably that she was going to pummel him with her four fists if they ever got out of this frozen state.

On the other hand, how could he possibly know?

Maybe she was enjoying him holding her tight and kissing her. She had no way of giving him the slightest hint.

What if this was how their lives would end—stuck together like this for eternity? It certainly wasn't the worst way to go. But still, he wasn't ready to die, and neither was Rachel.

Riley heard a boy's voice behind him, in the distance. "Well, they're obviously not brother and sister."

"I told you," a girl said.

The area around them gradually became flooded with light as the voices grew stronger.

"Okay, you two," the boy said, "I'm gonna unlock you now. But if you don't play nice, I'm gonna relock you, okay?"

Thank God, Riley thought, he and Rachel were not permanent sculptures.

"We know you're Fundamentalists because you're not tagged," the girl said. "You're not supposed to cross the Main Stream."

Riley had no idea what Fundamentalists were, and he didn't know anything about a Main Stream.

But at least the aliens were talking in English. No, wait—he and Rachel were the aliens. Great job on the translation chip, Doc, Riley thought. He just hoped the outgoing translation functionality worked as well as the incoming, because if these kids started hearing gibberish coming out of his mouth, they would surely lock up Rachel and him permanently.

“I wonder how they made it across,” the boy asked.

“Well, if you’ll unlock them, maybe we’ll find out.”

Riley and Rachel unfroze.

“So, how did you get here?” the boy asked.

Riley turned around. The two beings looked very much like humans—except for their four arms. The boy was holding an odd-looking gun. They each had a light beaming from their waists, like a flashlight belt buckle.

“Hi, I’m Crinblee, and this is my brother, Torgwal. Please excuse his rudeness.”

Odd names, Riley thought. But it made sense: their names had no English equivalents. It was probably how the names actually sounded in their



own language.

“I wasn’t being rude,” Torgwal said, “I just want to know—”

Crinblee held up one of her four hands to her brother, which apparently carried the same meaning as it did for humans. Then she looked at Riley and Rachel. “And what are your names?”

“I’m Riley and this is Rachel. And yes, you’re correct—we are not brother and sister.”

“So, how did you get across the Main Stream?” Crinblee asked.

Riley had no idea what to say. “Uh, it wasn’t too hard.”

Torgwal looked at him in disbelief. “It’s five kilometers wide and 20 meters deep. And the water moves at a rate of 60 knots.”

“Well, we’re very good jumpers,” Riley said, unsure of whether Torgwal was serious.

“Somebody flew you over here and dumped you, didn’t they?” Crinblee asked. “I’m sorry. I hope it wasn’t your parents.”

“To tell you the truth,” Riley said, “it’s all kinda fuzzy. We’re not quite sure how we got here.”

“What happens to people who get dumped here?” Rachel asked.

“The Federals fly them back,” Torgwal said.

“Well, that’s not so bad,” Rachel said.

“Then they track down whoever dumped them here and put them in a permanent lock,” Torgwal said. “Which, for all practical purposes, means they’re life is over—since only the Federals have the unlocking code.”

“Whoa,” Riley said.

“You didn’t know that?” Torgwal asked.

“No,” Rachel said.

“It’s terrible,” Crinblee said, “but they have to do it or Fundamentalists would be dumping kids all the time. Our population is tightly controlled here in Tolerance. The Fundamentalists rejected our way of life, so they were forced to live outside the Main Stream.”

Riley thought that Tolerance seemed like a very odd name for this place. He suspected the word may have gotten mangled in translation.

“We don’t really understand why the laws are the way they are,” Torgwal said. “It’s not something

they teach in school.”

“How old are you two?” Rachel asked.

“I’m ten and my brother’s eleven,” Crinblee said.

Riley was shocked. Crinblee and Torgwal were about the same height as Riley and Rachel. “Well, I’m fourteen and—”

Rachel jumped in. “Yeah, right—fourteen.” She laughed and shook her head. “Riley’s always pretending to be older. We’re both eleven.”

Riley was about to protest, when he realized what Rachel was doing. It was smart to pretend to be Crinblee and Torgwal’s age. If he and Rachel were fourteen, wouldn’t they be a lot more knowledgeable about things like the Main Stream? And wouldn’t they be taller than these kids? Doc probably did this on purpose—made their copies the size of fifth graders so they wouldn’t be expected to know all the things an adult would know. He wondered how tall the adults were on this planet.

“That’s what I figured,” Torgwal said.

“You guys want to hang out with us for a while—until they send you back?” Crinblee asked.

“We can’t take them home,” Torgwal said.

“Mom will ground us for a year.”

“Not if she doesn’t find out.”

“Are you serious? She’s gonna find out as soon as they walk into the house and the alarm goes off.”

“Mom’s at work,” Crinblee said.

“But she’ll get an alert—and so will the Federals. And they can get pretty rough with Fundamentalists who break into homes. That’s a serious crime.”

“They wouldn’t be breaking in,” Crinblee said. “We’d be letting them in.”

“You really think the Federals care about that? They’re not gonna listen to anything we say. And remember a while back—that Fundamentalist kid who broke into that store?”

“We don’t know if that story’s true,” Crinblee said.

“What happened?” Riley asked.

“They say the Federals beat him up so bad that he died,” Torgwal said. “They took his body back across and just left it in some field.”

“But the alarm won’t go off if we can use your Tagalator.”

“I don’t know, Crinblee...”

“Hey, it worked for us,” Crinblee said. “Why wouldn’t it work for them?”

“Wait. Is this some type of experimental equipment?” Rachel asked. “Cause I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It won’t hurt you,” Crinblee said.

Riley and Rachel stared at each other.

Crinblee said, “Look, here are the options: (A), we leave you out here to be eaten by Baljeevers; (B), we call the Federals right now and let them pick you up and take you back home; or (C), we try Torgwal’s Tagalator on you, and if it works we can hide you at our house for a while. What’ll it be?”

Riley didn’t know what the hell a Baljeever was, but the fact that it was capable of eating them was all he needed to know. “Okay, we’ll take Option C,” Riley said. “Right, Rachel?”

“Yeah, sure,” Rachel said.

“Great.” Crinblee smiled. “Let’s go.”

Riley and Rachel followed closely behind them, mimicking their peculiar skipping movements. Riley found this technique to be much less tiring than the running and hopping that he and Rachel had been

doing. How could they have known that there was a better way? They were newbies on this planet.

Doc Himmel was gonna laugh his butt off when he saw this. Maybe he'd laugh himself into a terminal coughing fit. It would serve him right for using them as lab rats. Although if the old coot died, it might leave them stuck here forever.

Even with the light from Torgwal and Crinblee's flashlights, it was hard to see where they were going. Riley figured they were skipping at upwards of thirty miles per hour. Slamming into a tree would be a disaster.

They were approaching a row of houses from the rear. The homes were narrow and tall. When they were two hundred yards away—Torgwal pointed and yelled out, "That's our house." He leaped ten feet into the air and latched onto the trunk of a large tree. Then he began to shinny up it with his four arms and two legs. Crinblee followed her brother up the tree in similar fashion. The two siblings climbed in through a hatch in the floor of a treehouse that was some twenty-five feet off the ground.

A light came on inside the treehouse and

Crinblee looked down through the hatch. “You’d better come up quick. If you stand there for too long you’re going to start attracting Baljeevers.”

Riley heard a low rumble, and the ground trembled. “What the hell was that?” He looked around, but it was too dark to see anything.

“That was a Baljeever,” Crinblee said. “Get up here—now!”

Rachel scampered up the tree so fast that Riley couldn’t even see her arms and legs moving. He heard the rumble again—louder this time. He didn’t have time to think about the logistics of using his four arms and two legs to climb up the tree. It just happened. One moment he was standing on the ground about to be attacked by some vicious animal, and the next he was in the treehouse, sitting on the floor next to Rachel, catching his breath.

Crinblee was standing next to them and Torgwal was sitting at a small table typing on something that looked similar to an iPad.

“What are Baljeevers?” Riley asked.

“They’re big black furry animals with eight legs and razor-sharp claws,” Crinblee said. “We don’t

have to worry about them during the daytime because they're nocturnal. But when it gets dark, they come out of their caves and start preying on anything that breathes. I'm surprised you don't have them where you live."

"Well, if they're such a menace, then why don't your people just hunt them all down and kill them?" Riley asked.

"Because they're endangered," Crinblee said. "Their population is declining for no apparent reason. The scientists haven't figured it out yet."

"So what?" Rachel asked. "Sounds like they're a menace. I mean, is a dangerous predator like that even worth saving?"

"Their bodies emit a rare gas that helps purify our air," Crinblee said. "Researchers have tried to create a synthetic version of the gas, but so far they've failed. And when they try to mate the animals in captivity, but the cubs always die."

"You said they only come out at night," Riley said. "So, are they afraid of the light? Would we have been safe if we'd had flashlights?"

"No," Crinblee said. "They hate the light, but



they'll still attack you if they're hungry enough. They'll shred you into a thousand pieces and then suck up the pieces with their snout. Their food gets digested in their sinuses. And, by the way, they can also kill you by sneezing on you. Their sinus fluid contains a powerful acid. So when we go into the fields, we always carry a couple of fully-charged lock guns in case we don't get home before dark."

"That's what you used on us, right?" Rachel asked. "The thing that froze us in place?"

"Yes," Crinblee said. "We always take the lock guns with us, but we didn't plan to stay out until dark. Then we spotted a couple of Fundamentalists."

"And you zapped us," Rachel said. "I thought I was dead—or in some kind of limbo between life and death. It was the weirdest thing ever. Could you have left us that way permanently?"

"No," Crinblee said. "Not with the lock guns we have. Only the Federals can do a permanent lock. They have military-grade lock guns. Our locks wear off after about an hour—on humans, that is. With Baljeevers they only last a few minutes. It's because

those things are so massive. But a few minutes is enough time to get away—unless...”

“Unless what?” Riley asked.

“Sometimes they travel in packs,” Crinblee said, “and if you were to come across five or six of them, you might not have enough battery power to lock them all.”

“Shit,” Rachel said.

Crinblee chuckled. “Yeah, because you definitely can’t outrun them. You’d think they would be slow on their feet, but those huge things are the fastest animals living here. They’ve been clocked at 100 kilometers per hour.”

Yikes, Riley thought. That was close to the top speed of a Cheetah. Of course, the Baljeevers had the advantage of the lower gravitational pull of this planet. If they were on earth, a Cheetah would probably leave them in the dust.

“We don’t have to worry about the Baljeevers unless we’re in the fields though, because of the electronic shock fencing that surrounds the city,” Crinblee said. “But this treehouse is just beyond the city line—outside the shock fence.”

“Why would you want to build a treehouse in a place where you’re not protected against the those beasts?” Riley asked. “I’ll bet you don’t come out here at night much.”

“Actually, we do,” Crinblee said. “Baljeevers are lousy tree climbers, so we just don’t go down to the ground. We use this to go back and forth to the house.” She led Riley and Rachel to a window, and used her flashlight to light up the area between the treehouse and their home. There was a motorized zip line with a large metal cart suspended from it. Crinblee pointed to a window on the fourth floor of the house. The other end of the zip line was attached to a bracket just below the window. “That’s Torgwal’s bedroom.”

Torgwal said, “Okay, it’s ready.” He got up from the table. There was something in his hand that looked like a fancy metal ink pen.

“What’s that?” Riley asked.

“This is a custom Tagalator.” Torgwal grinned. “Built it myself.”

“And it’s highly illegal,” Crinblee said.

“It’s works just like the ones the Federals tag you

with when you're born," Torgwal said.

"What does it do?" Rachel asked.

Torgwal stepped toward her. "When I hold the tip against your skin and press the tag button, a microscopic chip will be inserted just below the surface of the skin. You won't feel a thing. And it'll work just like an official tagging chip. I've entered your name as Tunpricwa Quanshtick."

Riley almost laughed.

"Why? That's not my name," Rachel said.

"That's the point," Torgwal said. "We don't want the Federals to know your real name. Tunpricwa Quanshtick is a common name here in Tolerance. The most common name for males is Gynblat Quanshtick."

It was like naming yourself John Smith, Riley thought.

"How common is Rachel?" Rachel asked.

"You're the first Rachel I've ever met," Torgwal said.

"I wish I had an unusual name," Crinblee said. "Crinblee is almost as common as Tunpricwa. And Torgwal is common too. Our parents weren't very

creative. They named us after ‘two of the founders of our great nation of Tolerance.’ At least, that’s how Mom tells it.”

“So, after you tag us, we’ll be able to go into your house?” Rachel asked.

“Right,” Torgwal said. “Okay, sit down over here.”

“Why do I need to sit?” Rachel asked. “Is this gonna make me faint?”

“It’s just a precaution,” Torgwal said.

Rachel studied Torgwal’s face for a moment. Riley could see her mind working. Was it safe to have a foreign object injected into her body by this alien she had just met—even though it wasn’t really her body, but merely a copy? Riley was sure she was about to ask him to go first.

“Okay.” Rachel sat down.

“But wait,” Riley said. “We won’t be in the system. Won’t that tip off the Federals?”

“You’d think so, huh?” Crinblee asked.

“It would be a major tip-off—if the Federal’s system worked the way it’s supposed to,” Torgwal said. “But the truth is that they’re constantly having

issues with lost data and programming errors and security breaches. I used our neighbor's house down the street as your address. Their last name is Quanshtick, so if the Federals do notice two extra family members for that house, they'll probably just think your names got accidentally dropped and then re-added to the database."

"Okay," Riley said. "But they won't think it's funny that we're staying at your house overnight?"

"Not at all," Torgwal said, "since you guys are our age and you're brother and sister. We're just having a sleepover."

"Brother and sister?" Riley asked.

Torgwal said, "I've set you up with the same address and the same parents, so you need to be siblings."

Crinblee grinned at Rachel. "So no more of you two kissing in public while you're here."

"Not a problem." Rachel smirked at Riley.

"Ready?" Torgwal asked Rachel.

"I guess so," Rachel said.

"I'll locate it in the same spot the Federals use—your lower left arm," Torgwal said.

Rachel held out her arm.

Torgwal placed the tip of the Tagalator against her skin and pressed the tag button, which made a faint clicking sound.

“Did it work?” Rachel asked. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“I’ll check.” Torgwal picked up his tablet computer and entered a few keystrokes. “Yes, your tag is transmitting perfectly.”

Riley leaned in for a close look at Rachel’s arm. “Amazing. It doesn’t even leave a mark.”

“Okay, now your turn.” Torgwal stepped up to Riley. “By the way, you can’t tell anyone that I did this, because as my sister said, it’s illegal. Of course, most people wouldn’t even know how to do it.”

“But you’re not like most people,” Riley said, holding out his arm.

Torgwal smiled. “That’s right. I’m way smarter.” He tagged Riley’s arm. “Any computer within 20 meters will pick up your signal and broadcast tracking data to the Federals.”

Rachel pointed to Torgwal’s computer. “So now the Federals know we’re here in this treehouse?”

Torgwal shook his head. “Well, almost any computer.”

“Torgwal’s computer is special,” Crinblee said. “He hacked it—which is also illegal.”

“It only sends out the data that I tell it to send,” Torgwal said. “And we’re outside the range of the house computers.”

“Earlier you said you used the Tagalator on yourselves,” Riley said. “Why did you do that? I thought everybody here got tagged as a baby.”

“I gave us a second tag—one that I could manipulate—and then I disabled the original one,” Torgwal said.

Crinblee laughed. “He had been talking about how much the Federals trust their tagging system, yet how easy it would for him to outsmart it. I said, ‘Then prove it.’ I dared him to give us custom tags and program them to give us older ages. I told him that if we dressed up to look the part, I thought we could walk right into a dance club.”

“I told her she was crazy,” Torgwal said. “Programming the custom tag chips was easy, but I figured if we showed up at a club and they saw how



short we were they'd never believe we were of legal age. But I was wrong. The guy at the door barely even looked at us. I guess he figured that since our tags said we were old enough, who was he to argue?"

"Those guys working the doors aren't very bright," Crinblee said.

"Hey, I'd love to go check out a club," Riley said. "How about you, Rachel?"

She didn't answer.

Everyone looked at her.

A very long, pencil-thin snake had wrapped itself around her chest and it was staring her down, its head only six inches from her nose, as though it was trying to hypnotize her.

"Don't move a muscle." Crinblee inched toward Rachel. Just when she was about to grab the snake's head from behind, it lunged at Rachel's neck and began wrapping itself around her throat.

"Shit," Torgwal said. "Grab the head!"

"I'm trying to," Crinblee said.

The snake quickly spun the entire length of its body around Rachel's neck, creating a two-inch

thick collar.

“Where is the head?” Riley asked.

Torgwal grabbed a pair of wire cutters out of a small toolbox on the floor. “It’s hiding inside the coil.”

Rachel gasped. “I can’t breathe. Do something!”

Crinblee pulled at the layers on the left side of Rachel’s neck. Torgwal snipped away layers on the right side.

Rachel’s face began to turn red.

“Hurry!” Riley said. “Cut it off!”

“I am,” Torgwal said, “but I have to be careful not to cut her neck.”

Riley saw the look of terror in her eyes. How long could she last without oxygen? He stepped in close to her and tried to speak calmly. “You’re gonna be okay, Rachel. Just hang on.”

She passed out.

“I still don’t see the head,” Crinblee said.

“Here it is.” Torgwal grabbed hold of the snake’s head and pulled it out far enough to snip it off with the wire cutters. “Bastard!” He threw the head out the window.

The remaining body of the snake began to loosen its grip. Crinblee and Torgwal pulled it off of Rachel's neck.

"Rachel?" Riley began slapping her on the cheek. "Rachel, are you okay? Are you okay?"

Her eyes opened. "Quit hitting me."

"Oh, thank God." Riley hugged her. "I thought you were a goner."

"Really? Then why were you telling me I was gonna be okay?" Rachel asked. "What the hell kind of snake was that? I didn't even feel it until it was already wrapped around my chest and staring me in the eye."

"That was a Yagglasmooze," Crinblee said. "Fully grown, they can be up to six meters long. We're used to them, so we notice it immediately when one starts to slither up our leg."

"We just throw it on the ground and stomped its head." Torgwal said. "You've got the upper hand until they wrap themselves around your neck."

"Which is why we never sleep out here," Crinblee said. "It's a good way to die young."

Riley said, "So, these Yagglesmoots—"

“Yagglasmooze,” Crinblee said.

“So, these Yagglasmooze strangle you to death just for the fun of it?” Riley asked.

“No,” Torgwal said. “They do it because they’re hungry. Once they’re sure you’re dead, they go up your nose and start eating your brains.”

“Oh, God!” Rachel said. “What about your house? Do they ever get in there?”

“No,” Torgwal said. “Not a chance. The shock fence keeps them out. They can’t even get into the yard.”

“And with the new software upgrade, the shock fence even keeps out the Flizzernisties,” Crinblee said.

Riley wondered what the heck a Flizzernisty was.

Crinblee seemed to notice the confusion on his face. “Are there no Flizzernisties where you live?”

“No,” Riley said.

“Do you have lizards?” Torgwal asked.

“Yes,” Riley said.

“Okay,” Torgwal said, “a Flizzernisty looks like a tiny lizard with wings. It’ll bite you, but it doesn’t

really hurt.”

“It just makes you itch,” Crinblee said.

“Like a mosquito,” Rachel said.

“A what?” Torgwal asked.

He glared at Rachel and then turned to Torgwal.

“It’s kinda like your Flizzernisty.”

“The main thing to remember about the Flizzernisties is to stay away from the hives,” Crinblee said. “A few bites won’t hurt you, but if they swarm you—well, then you’re in big trouble.”

Rachel looked around the treehouse. “Can we please go into the house now? I don’t want to get bit by one of those flying lizards, and I sure don’t want to tangle with another Yagglasmooze.”

Torgwal laughed. “I don’t blame you. Yeah, let’s go to the house and see if we can fool the Federals with your custom tags.”

They walked over to the window and looked down at the metal cart that was suspended from the motorized zip line.

“It can only carry one person at a time,” Torgwal said.

“I’ll go first, so I can open the window and turn

on the lights.” Crinblee climbed into the cart. She pressed a button inside the cart and it began to travel across the cable toward the house.

“Battery-operated?” Riley asked.

“No,” Torgwal said. “It gets power from the house—through the cable.”

When Crinblee reached the house, she opened the window and climbed into the house, and then sent the cart back toward the treehouse.

“I’ll go next.” Rachel stepped up to the window. When the cart had reached the treehouse, the motor stopped and Torgwal helped Rachel climb into the cart.

Torgwal said, “Okay, now, press the green button.”

Rachel gripped one side of the cart and pressed the button. When the cart reached Torgwal’s window, Crinblee helped her climb into the house and sent the cart back to the treehouse.

“How do you control the cart from here?” Riley asked. “I mean, what if Crinblee forgets to send it back to you?”

Torgwal held up his tablet computer.

“Of course.” Riley said.

“Hop in,” Torgwal said.

Riley got in. When he made it to the house, Crinblee said, “Be careful getting out.”

Riley climbed through the window and began to look around. “So, this is Torgwal’s bedroom?” The walls, the ceiling, the floor—the entire room appeared to be made of sheet metal. “A steel room?”

“Steel?” Crinblee seemed confused.

Oops. It was a word that didn’t translate. Doc’s translation system had obviously been substituting approximate values for much of what was being said, and doing an excellent job of it. But it was not perfect.

“It’s a composite material made from recyclables,” Crinblee said.

“Hmm.” Riley touched the wall. It wasn’t like anything he’d ever felt. “Interesting.”

“But where’s the bed?” Rachel asked. “And the rest of the furniture?”

“Wow,” Crinblee said. “You mean you guys don’t have Synthesication?”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Rachel said.

“It’s the latest thing.” Torgwal climbed in through the window. “Let me show you. You’re gonna love this. Everybody stand here in the center of the room.”

Once they were in place, Torgwal walked to the door. Riley saw him reach for what should have been the light switch. But instead, it was a small display that looked like an LCD screen.

As Torgwal’s hand approached the screen it came to life, displaying several buttons. He touched one of them.

Items began to materialize before their eyes: a king size bed—fully made, a desk covered with gadgets and a matching chair, and a large screen on the wall. Did they have TV here? Riley could only imagine the weird shows they’d have here. The walls became covered with a blue fabric with patterns in it—like wallpaper. The ceiling transformed into a puffy white styrofoam-like material. The floors were carpeted.

“Is all this stuff real?” Riley asked.

“Try it,” Crinblee said. “Sit down on the bed.”

Rachel acted like she wanted to, but hesitated.



Riley sat on it. "Wow. And it's comfortable."

Rachel walked over to the desk and sat down in the chair. "What's all this stuff?"

"Just some projects I've been working on," Torgwal said. "Okay, now stand up, because I'm about to make it all go away."

Riley and Rachel stood up and stepped away from the furniture.

Torgwal touched a button on the panel by the door, and the room went back to the way it had been before: bare and cold.

Riley reached down where the bed had been and tried to feel it, but nothing was there. "That's incredible."

"It's Synthesication technology," Torgwal said. "Actually there are two processes. Synthesication compacts objects into their smallest electronic form."

"I've never heard of anything like that," Riley said.

"He's kidding, Riley," Rachel said. "It's got to be some kind of a trick."

"Nope. No tricks. That's how it works," Torgwal said. "And then once an object has been converted

into electronic form, it is stored in the Synthesication Computer's memory. That's what just happened—when things disappeared. They didn't vanish into thin air. They were scanned, compacted, converted, and stored by the Synthesication Processor. The reverse process is called Desynthesication. It converts the items back into their original state."

"It's not something we really needed for our house," Crinblee said, "because we've got plenty of room. But think about it: a person could live in a small, one-room apartment, yet have all the comforts of home. You don't need a place for your bed until you're sleepy. The rest of the day you could have a couch or a desk or a kitchen table and stove in that space."

"Wow, that's cool. What about people though?" Riley asked. "Does the Synthesication process work on people?"

"No," Torgwal said.

"Actually, we don't know whether it does or not," Crinblee said. "Parliament passed a law forbidding the use of Synthesication on any living being. So those limits are hard-coded into the

system.”

Torgwal said, “We heard that Federal Researchers tested the technology on animals, and—”

“You don’t even want to know what happened,” Crinblee said.

“Eww,” Rachel said. “You’re right—I don’t want to know.”

Doc was going to love hearing about this, Riley thought. Too bad he was so close to dying. He wouldn’t have time to try to replicate the technology.

Something began to beep.

“What’s that?” Rachel asked.

“It’s our mom,” Crinblee said. “Hurry—lie down by the door, up against the wall so she can’t see you.”

Riley and Rachel scurried to the floor near Torgwal’s feet.

Torgwal touched a button on the display panel. “Hi, Mom.”

“Where have you two been? I’ve tried to call you several times. And I lost your tracking signals for

two hours. Have you and your sister been out in the fields again?"

"No, Mom, just in the treehouse," Torgwal said.

"Crinblee, you look like you've been sweating," their mom said. "Are you sure you haven't been in the fields?"

"It's hot in the treehouse, Mom."

"How many times have I told you two that you can't go to the treehouse without a computer? It worries me when you go off the grid."

"I'm sorry, Mom," Torgwal said.

"Me too," Crinblee said.

"Well, I'm sorry I have to work nights," their mother said, "but that's just the way it is right now."

"That's okay, Mom," Crinblee said. "We understand."

"Good," she said. "So, are you in for the night?"

"Yes, Mom," Torgwal.

"Good," their mother said. "Just one more thing. Who are Tunpricwa and Gynblat Quanshtick, and why are they in your bedroom?"

"Uh...they live down the street, and we were just hanging out," Crinblee said.

“So where are they?” their mom said. “I want to see them.”

Crinblee motioned for Riley and Rachel to stand up. “Here they are, Mom.”

“Hmm, I don’t remember ever seeing you two before.”

“They don’t get out much,” Torgwal said.

“Okay, fine. I’ve got to get back to work. But they need to go home soon. Bye.”

Torgwal closed the connection.

“You think your mom believed you?” Riley asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Torgwal said. “I’m a good liar when I have to be. And besides, it’s not that hard to believe that me and Crinblee made a couple of new friends.”

“Really?” Crinblee asked. “When is the last time we made any new friends?”

Torgwal shrugged. “Still—I think she bought it.”

Crinblee furrowed her brow. “Or she could be calling the Quanshticks right now to check our story.”

“Nah, she wouldn’t do that,” Torgwal said. “She

has complete faith in me.” He grinned.

The panel near the door beeped three times in rapid succession.

Torgwal’s smile evaporated.

“They’re here,” Crinblee said.

“Who?” Rachel asked.

“The Federals,” Crinblee said. “Mom called it in.”

“No,” Torgwal said, “they can’t get here that fast.”

Three more beeps, and then a voice over the panel said, “Federal Officers. Open the door immediately.”

Crinblee turned to Riley and Rachel. “You’ve got to get out of here.”

“Can’t you just hide us somewhere?” Riley asked.

“No,” Torgwal said. They’re tracking your tags. You’ve got to get out of range—back in the fields.”

“No,” Rachel said, “we can’t go back there. The Baljeeverers will get us.”

“Well, it’s either that or let the Federals arrest you,” Torgwal said.

“And fly us back across the Main Stream?” Riley asked.

Torgwal looked at his sister, who didn't offer any input. “We don't know for sure what the Federals do with illegals.”

“But you said they just take them back home,” Rachel said.

“That's the official word,” Crinblee said. “That's what they say they do. But we have no way of knowing whether it's true. They may torture them first. Or they might not even take them back at all.”

“What do you mean?” Riley asked.

“There are rumors that they've started executing illegals,” Torgwal said. “I think you're better off going back to the fields. I'll give you a couple of lock guns and you can have our flashlight belts.”

Torgwal and Crinblee took off their flashlight belts and gave them to Riley and Rachel. Torgwal entered some keystrokes into the panel and the furniture reappeared. Then he went to his desk, grabbed two lock guns out of a drawer, and handed them to Riley and Rachel. “They're fully charged—but they're only for the Baljeevers. Don't use them

on a Federal officer whatever you do. And don't use them until you have to. You don't want to run out of power. Go back to where we found you: in the open field. Get there as fast as you can and stay there, because the Baljeeverers prefer the wooded areas."

Torgwal handed Riley an electric lantern. "Once you get there, turn on this lantern and keep it on all night. There should be enough juice to last until sunrise. It should keep the Baljeeverers at a distance—unless..."

"Unless what?" Riley said.

"Unless there's a pack," Torgwal said.

Torgwal picked up a metal spike and a leather holster from his desk. "If you have to use a lock gun on a Baljeever, stab him in the eye with this spear while he's locked."

Rachel cringed. "Gross."

"You must push it deep into the brain to kill him," Torgwal said. "Then pull out the spear. The Baljeeverers will eat him instead of you—if you're lucky." Torgwal slid the spike into its holster and handed it to Riley.

"Are you sure that will work?" Riley secured the



holster to his waist, just below the flashlight belt. "Have you ever tried it?"

"No." Torgwal pulled the desk away from the wall. There was a leather scabbard attached to the back of the desk. Torgwal unhooked it and handed it to Riley. "So, take this machete—just in case."

Riley tied the cords of the scabbard around his waist.

A voice from the panel said, "Federal Officers coming in."

"They can just break in?" Rachel said.

"They don't have to break in—they have the master codes," Crinblee said. "Now, go!"

Riley and Rachel hurried to the window.

"You'll have to ride over together," Torgwal said. "There's no time for two trips."

Riley helped Rachel climb into the cart. "Are you sure this cable can support both of us?"

"Just go!" Torgwal helped Riley get into the cart and Riley activated the motor.

The cart began to move across the cable.

"I'm scared, Riley," Rachel said.

"I know." He put his arm around her. "Me too."

Riley and Rachel were riding across the zip line in the cart, praying that the cable would continue to support their combined weight. They were nearly to the treehouse when Torgwal's bedroom window went dark. A single light, located above the back porch of the house provided just enough illumination for them to climb out of the cart into the treehouse.

"It's too dark in here," Rachel said. "There could be Yagglasmooze. We need to turn on our flashlights."

"No. If the Federals look out here, they'll see the light. I think I can find the hatch." Riley got down on his knees and felt around on the floor with all four hands until he located the hatch and opened it.

They looked down at the ground—which they could barely see—thirty feet below.

"How are we supposed to get down?" Rachel asked.

"Just pretend a Yagglasmooze is about to crawl up your leg," Riley said.

Rachel took a quick breath and jumped through the hatch, grabbed onto the tree trunk and used her

legs and four arms to scramble downward, head first. She rolled onto the grass and looked up at Riley. "Hurry up!"

Riley didn't have time to think about what Rachel had just done, or how she had done it, or the fact that it was impossible. He just did it.

The back porch door burst open.

Riley and Rachel scrambled to get out of the light, and hid behind the tree.

A bright beam of light flooded the area where they had just been standing.

A male voice shouted, "You two need to come down from that treehouse right now. We're not going to hurt you. We're Federal Officers. We just want to talk to you."

The light grew brighter as the officers walked toward them.

Riley whispered to Rachel, "We need to go. Now." He took Rachel's hand and led her away from the tree quietly, trying to keep the large tree trunk between them and the officers.

"Go up and check the treehouse," a man said. "They're probably hiding up there. If not, they've

run out into the fields, in which case, nature will solve the problem for us.”

Riley and Rachel were about twenty meters away when she whispered, “This is crazy. I can’t see where I’m stepping.”

Riley said, “Let’s turn on our flashlights and make a run for it.”

“You honestly think we can outrun them?”

“No,” he said. “I just don’t think they’ll chase us for very long.”

“So we’ll do the skipping thing that we learned from Crinblee and Torgwal?”

“Right. On three,” Riley said. “One, two, three.”

They both switched on the flashlights that were on the belts Torgwal had given them and began to run, then skip.

“There they are!” an officer yelled.

Riley and Rachel skipped through the woods at a dangerous rate of speed, leaping high into the air, sometimes clearing the tops of the trees, dodging branches, and watching for Baljeevers.

They finally broke out into the open field.

Riley said, “Stop!”

They switched to a run, then to a walk, and finally came to a stop.

“Why are we stopping?” Rachel asked. “We need to keep—”

“Listen,” Riley said.

Dead silence.

“They didn’t follow us—or they would already be here.” Riley unhooked the electric lantern from his belt.

“That officer said that if we were in the fields, nature would solve their problem,” Rachel said. “He was referring to the Baljeevers, wasn’t he? I’m not so sure we made the right choice. Maybe we should have surrendered.”

“So we could be tortured—or executed?” Riley turned on the lantern and set it on the ground.

“Doc wouldn’t let that happen. He’d bring us back home, right? He’d save us before they could do that.”

“There’s a ten-minute delay, remember? By the time he knew they were about to kill us, we might already be dead.”

“Our copies would be dead,” she said.

“Our brains would be dead.”

“Maybe he was lying about that.”

“About sending a part of our real brains here with our copies?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Because if we knew that anything that happened to us here wouldn’t affect us back on Earth—”

“We wouldn’t care if our copies died, because we’d know that we would wake up in our real bodies back on Earth,” he said. “I think that’s it, dammit.” Riley pulled the machete out of its scabbard. “And I’m calling his bluff.” He held the machete out for Rachel to take. “Send me home, Rachel. Your choice: a blade through my heart or decapitation. I don’t care. Send me home now.”

Rachel stepped back. “Are you crazy? Put that thing away. Maybe Doc was lying—but I’m not gonna die trying to prove it. And I’m sure as hell not gonna kill you so I can be stuck on the shitty planet all by myself.”

“Fine.” Riley slid the machete back into its scabbard. “It is pretty far-fetched though—to think that he somehow transported part of our brains

along with our copies.”

“Everything he said and did was far-fetched,” she said. “We can’t take the chance that he was lying about our brains.”

“Maybe we’re not even here at all.”

“The dreaming theory?”

“That would explain everything,” he said.

“Yeah, well I don’t ever remember feeling pain in a dream before. And right now my feet are killing me.”

They heard a deep rumble in the distance.

“Baljeevers.” Rachel stepped behind Riley. “I thought the lantern would keep them away.”

“Torgwal said it probably would—unless there was a pack of them.”

Another rumble. Then a third rumble from a different direction.

They snatched their lock guns out of their holsters.

Riley said, “I’ll shoot the first one and you take the second one, okay? And one shot should do it. We don’t want to waste our batteries.”

A huge, black, freakish-looking monster ran out

from the darkness.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “It’s huge!”

“Stay strong and concentrate. We’ve got this.”

The Baljeever barreled toward them on all eight legs, and then stood on his hind legs and arched his trunk into the air.

Riley fired.

The animal froze in place—just ten feet away from them. In an instant the Baljeever’s speed had gone to zero.

Silence.

“Wow,” Riley said. “That was easy.”

“Riley, look out!”

He turned left and saw another Baljeever charging at them. It was moving so fast that Riley didn’t even have time to aim his lock gun. The trunk was two feet from Riley’s face when the creature froze.

“Got him,” Rachel said.

Riley felt warm urine streaming down his leg.  
“Thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “But now I’ve got to drive



a spike into their brains and kill them before they unfreeze.”

Another rumble, from behind them.

They both spun around and fired toward the noise.

Silence.

They looked at each other, and must have had the same thought: stand back to back. They did.

The animal raced toward them, skimming across the ground like a gigantic caterpillar. Riley fired.

The animal froze.

Rachel turned around. “I hope that’s the last one.”

Riley held up his hand. “Listen.”

Silence.

“I don’t hear anything,” she said.

“Okay, cover me while I kill them.” He holstered his lock gun and unsheathed the long spike Torgwal had given him. He leaned down to the animal’s head. “He can still see us and smell us, can’t he? Just like when we were frozen.”

“Don’t you think you should start with the first one you shot? We don’t know how long the lock will

hold.”

Riley straightened up. “Good idea.” He went to the first Baljeever. “Here goes.” He stabbed the spike into the animal’s eye and thrust it deep into his skull. Riley pulled it out, and blood and brains oozed out the creature’s eye socket and he began to move.

Riley jumped back. The animal lurched forward with its trunk swinging. Riley tripped and fell down. The beast toppled over and nearly landed on top of him. Riley scrambled to his feet.

The Baljeever lay motionless on the ground.

“Dammit! That was close,” he said. “Why didn’t you shoot him again?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It happened so fast.”

Riley picked up the spike and went to the second Baljeever, who was still frozen in place. “This time, be ready, and if he starts to move, freeze him, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And keep an eye on that one too.” Riley pointed to the third one, who was still locked, lying on the ground. He reached up and rammed the spike into

the Baljeever's eye. "Go to Hell, you stinking son of a bitch."

Riley glanced back at Rachel. "Ready?"

She pointed the lock gun at the animal. "Ready."

Riley yanked the spike out of the creature's eye and jumped out of the way.

The animal did not move.

"Okay. One more." Riley was beginning to feel cocky. He went to the third Baljeever, leaned over the animal's head and tomahawked the spike through his brain to the back of his skull, causing a thud. "These things aren't so tough after all." He jerked out the spike and started to walk away. Something caught his ankle. He looked down. It was one of the animal's paws.

Riley was reaching for his lock gun when Rachel fired hers.

Riley froze. Rachel had shot him instead of the Baljeever. The animal was still alive, tightening his grip on Riley's ankle. How long would it be before the razor-sharp claws tore off his foot?

Rachel fired again—this time hitting the animal. It froze.

She zapped Riley again, this time in unlock mode.

He tried to step away from the Baljeever, but the paw was still holding tight. “Shit! His claws are cutting into my ankle.”

“What can I do?” she asked. “If I unlock him—”

“No! Don’t do that.” He pulled the machete out of its scabbard and lifted it over his head with his upper arms. He brought it down across the animal’s arm, severing it. Blood spewed into the air.

“God!” Rachel turned away.

The paw relaxed, and Riley knelt down down and used all four hands to carefully open the sharp claws and release his ankle. “So, apparently a spike to the brain doesn’t necessarily kill them. Be ready to fire at those other two in case the lock wears off.”

“Why don’t we just run?”

“How do we know they won’t unfreeze and come after us? We can’t outrun these bastards.” Riley went to the head of the Baljeever who had grabbed his ankle and held up the machete with his upper arms

“What are you doing?” Rachel asked.

“It’s the only way to be sure.” He brought the blade down forcefully, slicing into the animal’s neck. But it only went partway through. He hacked the neck over and over again. Blood spurted out on the ground and all over Riley’s shoes and jumpsuit.

“Stop, Riley!”

He continued to chop until the head separated from the neck.

“Did you really have to do that? You got blood all over yourself.”

Riley looked down. “And the blood stinks. But remember what Torgwal said? Baljeevers will eat their own. So, I’m gonna give them plenty to munch on, so they won’t come after us.” He went to animal that was still standing. His neck was too high for Riley to reach, so he went around behind the beast and kicked him in the back, causing him to tip over and land face down. More chopping. More blood. But at least this one went faster. Riley was getting good at it. He imagined himself as a medieval knight.

“I hope the others don’t pick up the scent of blood before we can get away from here,” she said.

“Yeah, and I probably need to get to some water and wash it off of me.”

“Hurry.”

Riley sneered at her. “You wanna do it?”

“No. But just hurry. Please.”

He went to the last animal, and was about to take his first chop at the neck when he saw the head move.

The animal growled.

There was no time for Riley to run. He reached for the lock gun with his upper right hand.

All eight of the Baljeever’s limbs began to flail. Two of them squeezed together, clamping Riley’s legs in place. The animal’s trunk swung around and knocked the lock gun out of Riley’s hand. It landed between two of the moving arms. There was no way Riley could retrieve it.

“Lock him!” Riley started chopping at the neck as hard and fast as he could.

“I’m trying,” she said. “It’s not working! My battery must be dead!”

He continued to hack at the neck. Why was this one tougher than the others? Maybe it was Riley.

Maybe his arms were getting tired. But shouldn't he be feeling a rush of the adrenaline? The blade had barely cut through the thick fur. Was the machete getting dull?

The Baljeever's trunk whacked one of Riley's legs and he nearly went down. It was gradually getting stronger, coming out of the freeze. If the animal got his claws around Riley's legs or arms before he could sever the neck, the battle was lost. Was this how Riley would die—mauled to death by an alien monster? No!

The Baljeever was gaining more strength by the second, and Riley sensed that he might have only one more chance at the animal's neck, so he would make it count. No more quick chops. He'd use every ounce of his strength to inflict a mammoth blow. He quickly visualized it happening: the blade slicing cleanly through the neck—not stopping until it hit the ground.

Riley raised the machete over his head with his upper arms, grabbing them at the elbows with his lower hands, and pulled down with all four arms, letting out a thunderous howl, as he brought the

weapon down like the blade of a guillotine.

The head fell away, rolled to face up, and the animal's steely eyes stared up at Riley for a full two seconds before the life went out of them.

Riley's entire body tingled. He was afraid to move at first, in disbelief that he was still alive.

"Are you okay?" Rachel asked.

The blade of the machete was buried deep in the ground. Riley released the handle and looked over his shoulder. "I think so."

Something swooshed through the sky, fifty feet above their heads, and they ducked.

"What was that?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know." Riley hurried to where Rachel was standing.

A low rumble came from the woods, then another, then a chorus—no, more like an army—of Baljееvers.

"Oh, shit. Here they come," Riley said.

"We're dead." Rachel hid herself in his arms.

Another swoosh, and they were instantly sucked up into the sky.



---

RILEY AND RACHEL were standing face to face on top of a small, round platform in the center of what appeared to be the control room of a space ship. Riley suspected there might be an electric field surrounding them, and from the look in Rachel's eyes, she must have been thinking the same thing.

"You should not have run from Federal Officers." The man was wearing a blue uniform, and sitting in a captain's chair. He was a young man with dark, wavy hair, probably seven feet tall, with a lean build. And, of course, he had four arms.

"I am Lieutenant Drenchbawld Chimma. What are your names, please? Your real names."

"I'm Riley Rangle, and this is Rachel Oliver."

"Hmm. Unusual names. Good to meet you. But I wish it were under better circumstances. You seem like nice kids, but you've gotten yourselves into big trouble."

"I know," Riley said. "We're sorry about that, sir."

"The Baljeever's should have killed you. I'm

impressed that you were able to survive as long as you did. There's only one thing more powerful than a Baljeever's hunger: his sense of revenge. You thought they would eat their own, didn't you? That they would enjoy devouring their chopped-up brethren while you two got away safely. Well, the Baljeevers are cannibals, that's true. They would not have hesitated to eat their own—but only after they had tracked you down, sliced you to shreds, and enjoyed you as an appetizer. All it takes is one drop of blood in the air. They'd already picked up the scent, and hundreds of them were on their way." He shook his head. "If I'd gotten here a minute later, you two kids would have been nothing but blood slush."

"Thank you," Riley said.

"Yes, thank you, sir," Rachel said.

"Still, you have broken the law. I don't know how you made it over the Main Stream. But you're criminals, so I've got to take you in."

"Something happened to us, sir, and we're not sure what," Riley said. "We've lost our memories."

"Then how do you know your names?"

Rachel jumped in. "It's a partial loss, sir. We do remember some things."

"Yes," Riley said, "and I think somebody might have altered our tags, but we're definitely not Fundamentalists."

"Hmm," Lt. Chimma said. "Well, don't worry then. We'll sort it all out."

Riley couldn't believe the lieutenant was buying their lies. Or was he lying to them? Maybe this was merely idle chit-chat, and he and Rachel were going to be tortured and murdered regardless of what they said.

Lt. Chimma rotated his chair to his control panel. "Here we go." He touched a few buttons.

Rachel whispered to Riley, "Are we moving yet?"

"We're here." Lt. Chimma stood and walked them out of the aircraft. They were on top of a tall building. Two intense-looking soldiers were waiting for them. As the soldiers escorted the three of them across the roof toward the entrance to the building, Riley wondered if they should try to escape. They were not handcuffed or bound in any way. They

could run, but where to? Off the side of the building? Would Doc save them before they hit the ground? No. There was a ten-minute transmission delay. It would be suicide.

They went into the building and a Sergeant Klockler took Riley to an interrogation room. He suspected that Rachel would be questioned simultaneously. What would happen to them if they gave the wrong answers, or if they simply gave different answers?

Sgt. Klockler sat across from him at a table. "Who put the tag in your arm?"

If Riley told the truth, what would happen to Torgwal and Crinblee? And if he claimed to be from Tolerance, the next questions would be: who are your parents and where do you live? He could say that they were Fundamentalists, and that their parents dumped them in Tolerance. Maybe that would keep Torgwal and Crinblee out of trouble. But the Federals would try to track down Riley and Rachel's parents and put a permanent lock on them. What would happen when they discovered that he had lied to them?

But the worst thing he could possibly do was to tell the truth. A mad scientist from a distant planet transported us here with his giant space laser. Yeah, they'd love that one. What fun their scientists would have dissecting Riley and Rachel. So, what was the safest answer?

"To your people, Rachel and I would be considered Fundamentalists—because of where we're from. But we don't hold the same beliefs as the people of our homeland. Neither do our parents. In a few weeks, we are scheduled to be married—once we've both turned twelve. That is our law."

"I am familiar with the laws of your people. Go on."

"Rachel and I weren't ready to get married. We're not even sure we want to marry each other at all. As soon as we were married, we would have been expected to have a child every year, for as long as we're physically able. We don't believe the state has the right to force us to do that."

"You two sound more like Tolerants than Fundamentalists."

"That's why we came here."

“But how did you come here?”

“It was ingenious, really. Rachel thought of the idea of using a catapult. But that had been tried many times before, and nobody had made it across the Main Stream.”

“Of course not. It’s five kilometers wide.”

“I know. So, my dad wondered what would happen if we combined the idea of a catapult with a glider.”

Sgt. Klockler’s eyebrows arched.

“So, we did a test run—without a passenger.”

“And?”

Riley nodded. “It made it across—with a hundred meters to spare.”

“And that’s how you got here?”

“Rachel’s flight was perfect, but I almost didn’t make it—probably because I’m a bit heavier than she is. I could see that my glider was gonna come up short, so at the last moment I jumped for the shore. I landed in the water, but I grabbed onto a tree root and pull myself out. That was scary.”

“That’s a wild story.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Where’s the glider?”

“It broke into a million pieces when it hit the Main Stream.”

“Your friend’s glider. You said she made it to land.”

“We...set it on fire. That was the plan all along. There’s nothing left of it.”

“I see. And that’s your full story?”

“Uh, yes. I guess that just about covers it.”

Sgt. Klockler stood up. “Let’s go.”

He took Riley down the hall to the main area and found the other investigator—the one who had taken Rachel for questioning.

“Where’s the girl?” Sgt. Klocker asked.

“I already took her down there,” the other officer said.

Sgt. Klocker nodded. “Right.”

He walked Riley down a long, narrow hallway.

Riley had a bad feeling.

The windowless door was labeled Disposition Room. Sgt. Klocker opened it. Rachel was sitting on a bench near the back wall. Otherwise, the room was empty. The walls were brick, as were the floor and

ceiling. No cameras, no windows.

Sgt. Klocker motioned for him to step inside, and Riley went in. The door closed behind him. The sergeant had not offered any information as to what they were there for, but Riley was sure it wasn't anything good.

He sat down next to Rachel.

"Do you think they're watching or listening?" she asked.

Riley scanned the room. "I don't think so."

Rachel obviously wasn't convinced, since she leaned in and whispered, "What did you tell him about how we got across the Main Stream?"

Rachel's hand against his face and her warm breath in his ear caused him to lose focus for a moment. They were sworn enemies, bitter rivals, who had been working together simply because they were in survival mode—not because they actually cared for each another.

Or did they?

He held his hand beside his mouth and spoke into her ear. "I told him we used a catapult and gliders."



“Damn. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“But I don’t think he bought it. What did you say?”

“That we were dumped here by our parents. That’s when he brought me in here. So, if they compare our stories, we’re screwed.”

“Probably.”

“They think we’re Fundamentalists?”

“Or maybe aliens. I don’t know.” Riley looked around. “You know what this room looks like?”

“An incinerator?”

“Yeah, but I don’t see any gas jets.”

“Could be a completely different technology. Maybe they just push a button and we’re toast.” A tear ran down her cheek.

“Well, if we’re about to die...”

“What?”

“Would you mind if I...”

She grabbed his head, pulled his face to hers, and kissed him on the lips for a full five seconds.

“Oh, wow,” he said, and went back for more.

The door opened and an officer walked in.

“Are you gonna kill us?” Riley asked. “Because if

you are, I have a last request. Would you mind coming back in an hour. What's the difference? Nobody has to know."

The officer unholstered his weapon. "I'm sorry. I really am. But I have my orders."

"Okay," Riley said. "Thirty minutes. Ten minutes. Come on man, can't you see we're in love?"

He aimed the weapon at Riley.

"No, please," Rachel said.

"Doc! Get us out of here!" Riley yelled.

The officer fired and Riley's chest burst into flames.

Rachel tried to scream, but couldn't.

The officer fired at Rachel.

---

RILEY GASPED FOR BREATH, as though he'd been underwater for five minutes. He turned. Rachel was beside him, also struggling to catch her breath. But they were alive. "Rachel, are you okay?"

"Yeah. I think so."

They were back on earth, in Doc's dentist chairs. He'd apparently rescued them in the knick of time.

"I can't believe we survived that," he said.

"Me either," she said. "Your chest was on fire. Did you feel it?"

"It hurt like hell. But Doc got my brain out in time. I mean, he must have because I feel normal."

"Me too. Except that I'm still stuck in this chair."

"Doc?" Riley saw him sitting in the dental chair on the other side of Rachel.

Rachel turned her head and looked at Doc. "Is he—?"

"Dead? Sure looks like it. But maybe he's just sleeping." He tried to get out of his chair. "Dammit, Doc."

"Doc? Wake up," Rachel said.

"Doc!"

He didn't flinch.

"If he's dead, then how are we gonna get out of these chairs?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know. Hope for a power failure? Right now I'm just happy to be alive."

"But we could starve to death before anybody

finds us.”

A video came to life on the wall in front of them. It was Doc, smiling, with a cigarette hanging out of this mouth.

“Thanks to you two, I have proved that my equipment works. I’ve done the impossible. And now everyone on Earth will know how brilliant I am. But I don’t even care about that anymore, because I’m about to relocate to Sorella Uno. My copy will be a ten-year-old boy. A kid genius, cancer-free, endowed with my full brain power. And thanks to the knowledge I gained from your little trip, I will be able to avoid the kind of problems you encountered. Perhaps I’ll develop a synthetic Baljeever gas—save the environment and become a legend in Tolerance.” He laughed.

“He might actually do it,” Riley said.

Doc continued. “You’re probably wondering why I didn’t just make a copy of myself here on this planet. Start over as a boy right here on Earth. Don’t think I didn’t try. There is apparently something that works differently when the essence of the brain is transported through space. I still don’t understand

it. I just know that it works. You two are the proof.”

Riley shook his head.

Doc leaned in to the camera. “I set your return to automatically occur right after my copy is created on the planet. So, assuming that you managed to stay alive until then, you two are now safe and sound, watching this video. If not...my apologies.”

“Bastard,” Riley said. “You nearly got us killed.”

“I had other plans for you two, but that doesn’t matter now, so you will be released from your chairs when this video ends. Thanks for helping me get a brand new life.”

The video ended.

Rachel tried to get out of her chair. “I’m still stuck. He said we’d be released when the video was over.”

“Be patient. It may take a few seconds.”

“What do you think he meant when he said he had other plans for us?”

“I don’t know, but he said it doesn’t matter anymore. I just want to go home and...hey, you want to go out for pizza tonight?”

Another video started up.

Doc said, "I made this video in case something happened to me before you returned."

"This is an old video," Riley said.

"Yeah, he looks way younger."

"You're seeing this on the assumption that you have returned safely from the planet Sorella Uno. Congratulations. Next, you're off to the planet Sorella Due. Isn't this a fun adventure? Good luck."

The video ended.

"What the hell is going on, Riley?"

"We weren't the first. He's been doing this experiment for years."

"Then what happened to all the other kids?"

"What do you think?"

"The Baljeevers got them?"

"He went off and left us inside an automated system."

"We're in a loop?"

"I remember him saying that he wanted to investigate seven planets. His system is gonna keep sending us to one planet after the other. Shit!"

"We have got to get out of these chairs." Rachel fought to release herself.

They heard Doc's voice over the sound system.  
"Initiating countdown for transmission to Sorella Due. T minus twenty seconds."

"Noooooo!" Rachel said.

"He must have been so excited about his new life that he forgot to release us."

"Forgot? He did this on purpose."

"Why? He's not gonna be here to see all the feedback from the other planets."

"Oh, God! There's no way to know how far advanced the planets might be. We could be dealing with dinosaurs!"

"We are so screwed."

Doc: "Ten seconds to transmission."

"No, no, no!" Rachel struggled to get free."

"Nine."

"It's no use, Rachel."

"There's got to be a way," she said.

Doc: "Seven."

"I think I'm in love with you," he said.

"You're just saying that because we're about to die."

"Four."

"We're gonna be okay."

Doc: "Three."

"How can you say that?"

Doc: "Two."

"As long as we're together," he said.

Doc: "One."

They both screamed.

Doc: "Transmission."

Everything went black.

THE END



## JUSTICE

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THINGS GO TERRIBLY wrong after a cocky businessman hires an online hit man. 1,183 words.

---

CHAD STOPPED by his secretary's desk. "I'm going to lunch. Be back in an hour or so."

"Sir, you have an appointment with your CFO at one o'clock."

“I need you to push that back an hour. And I don’t want to be bothered. Understand?”

She smiled. “Yes, sir. And the roses have been delivered.”

“Great. Thanks, Katie.” He walked away from her desk.

“Happy Anniversary,” she said as he went out the door.

Chad stepped onto the elevator, nodding smugly to the riffraff. The young tech genius had been making arrangements to privatize one of the four elevators for himself. Having to ride up and down fifty-three floors with the commoners was an affront to his dignity.

He hopped into his red Lexus, let the top down, and drove out of the parking garage. It was a beautiful summer day. Driving down the freeway, he thought about how much better his life was about to be. Chad’s philosophy: if you’re not happy with your life—change it. And that’s exactly what he was doing.

When he arrived at the house, he pulled into the driveway and parked in the back. Chad grinned as

he unlocked the kitchen door and went inside. The anticipation was half the fun.

His cell phone rang. It was Bartholomew.

He hurried back out to the porch and closed the door. "Why are you calling me?"

"I just wanted you to know: it's done."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Dammit! Tomorrow was the day. Not today."

"My contract is now fulfilled."

"You fool! Do you realize what you've done?"

"I told you I would give you justice."

"But you didn't follow the plan. Why?"

"You said your wife was cheating on you. That was a lie."

"I hired you to do a job, and I gave you specific instructions. But you botched it. I'm not paying you the rest of the money."

"I don't want any more of your money."

"I've got to go." Chad walked across the porch to the stairs.

"Don't you want to inspect my work while you're there?"

Chad shook his head. “You don’t even know where I am. You claimed you could track anybody anywhere anytime.”

“I know exactly where you are.”

A chill ran down Chad’s back. He hurried back into the house. “Lacy?” He ran into the living room. “Lacy?” Then he ran upstairs and went into the master bedroom.

“God, no!”

Lacy lay on the carpet, as though she were sleeping—her head resting in a pool of blood. He dropped his phone, knelt down and checked for a pulse, but couldn’t find one.

He picked up his phone. “You bastard! This isn’t my wife! You killed the wrong woman!”

“I did exactly what I was hired to do. You said you wanted justice, and that’s what you got.”

“Justice? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your wife is a faithful, loving woman. You, on the other hand, are a lying, cheating fornicator.”

“You murdered my girlfriend. I didn’t hire you to do this. I’m calling the police. You’re gonna fry, you son of a bitch!”

“And what are you going to tell them? That you hired a hit man and he killed the wrong woman? Is that what you’ll say?”

“I...don’t know exactly what I’ll say, but—”

“Don’t waste your time. The police will never find me. I live in another country. And I didn’t kill anyone. Never do. I hire cheap, third-party contractors to do my dirty work. See the murder weapon? That’s your gun—the one you keep in your glove box.”

Chad leaned down and studied the pistol. “How did they get it out of my car?”

“I don’t worry myself with the details. But I’m sure your fingerprints are all over it, so it’ll be an open and shut case. It’s a common scenario: the husband’s girlfriend wants more, but he refuses to leave his wife, so the girlfriend threatens to tell the wife, and then the husband kills the girlfriend.”

“You think you’re so smart. Don’t you understand that no jury will ever convict me? It won’t even go to court. My lawyers will make sure of that.”

“If you didn’t want to be married anymore, you

could have divorced your wife. But, of course, then she might have taken half your wealth, and you couldn't have that, could you? So, you hired an online hit man to take care of it. But not so you could be with your girlfriend. You were never going to marry her anyway."

"Lacy knew it was just for fun."

"I doubt that."

"Whatever."

"Your lawyers can't save you this time, Chad."

"You'd be surprised what they can do. And if the police can't find you, I'll hire another hit man to track you down. I don't care what country you're in—you'll never be safe."

"You hired me online because you were impressed with my tech skills—the way I was able to communicate with you online anonymously. You're a network expert, yet you couldn't track me down or even learn my identity."

"So, what are you saying—that you're gonna send a drone to take me out?"

"Justice is what you paid for, Chad, and justice is what you'll get."

“Screw you!”

“You talk big, but I see the fear in your eyes, Chad.”

“You see?” He scanned the room and spotted Lacy’s laptop sitting on top of her dresser. The webcam. Bartholomew was watching him.

“Is your phone getting hot?”

Chad suddenly understood. Bartholomew had hacked into Chad’s cell phone and was causing the battery to—

The phone exploded in Chad’s face.

He collapsed to the floor.

---

WHEN LACY WOKE UP, the room was completely dark. She was groggy. Why was she on the floor? When she began to get up, she realized that her hair was wet. What had happened to her?

Then she remember the doorbell...the salesman...then what? Had he done this to her? Oh God, had he drugged her and beat her up? Had he raped her?

Lacy got up and felt her way around the bed and into the bathroom. She turned on the light. Her hair was soaked in blood. Or, at least it looked like blood. She couldn't find any cuts on her head or any bruises. But maybe it was still numb from whatever drug he gave her.

She washed her hair in the sink and dried it with a towel, and wrapped the towel around her head. Lacy was beginning to feel more alert, almost normal. She checked the rest of her body, looking for evidence of sexual assault, but found nothing.

It didn't make sense.

She went back into the bedroom, turned on the light, and saw a man's body on the floor. His face was burned beyond recognition, but his suit and shoes were all too familiar. She began to cry.

"Chad? Oh, Chad, baby, what happened to you?"

A webcam on her laptop captured everything.

At the other end of the connection, thousands of miles away, Bartholomew nodded. "Justice."



THE END

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## BOTTLED UP

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A TIMID HIGH school boy inadvertently uncorks his bottled up rage when he lets a genie out of the bottle. 1,249 words.

---

CHARLIE CLOSED his locker and held his head low as he hurried to biology class. It was last period. If he could make it through that door, he just might

survive another day of high school.

Hefton appeared out of nowhere with his two big buddies at his sides. “Hey, Charlie, where have you been all day? I’ve been looking for you.”

Charlie tried to sidestep them.

Hefton stretched out his long quarterback arm, hooked Charlie’s neck, and slammed him against his beefy chest. “I’ve been wanting to give you something.” He jabbed Charlie in the gut.

Charlie gasped.

“Ain’t you got anything to say to me?” He chuckled and looked back at his two stooges, goading them to laugh along.

Charlie struggled to catch his breath. Then he saw her—across the hallway, through the door, sitting at her desk: the new girl in school. Her eyes full of concern—or maybe it was pity.

---

THAT NIGHT, as Charlie drifted off to sleep, he thought about the new girl, and how he didn’t even know her name, and how it wouldn’t really matter

unless he could learn to stand up to Hefton.

His dreams were stranger than usual tonight—especially the one where he was walking along a deserted beach and found a bottle with a cork in it. He ran to pick it up. It might contain a love note to him from some beautiful mystery girl.

Charlie held the bottle up to the sun. No note, but something was moving inside—a small crab, he thought. No—it was a tiny man, dressed in a Texas Rangers baseball jersey and cap.

The little man was pointing to the cork above his head. “Get me the heck out of here.”

Charlie uncorked the bottle and...nothing happen—except that the little man had disappeared.

“Looking for me?” said a booming voice at Charlie’s back.

Charlie spun around.

The baseball player was seven feet tall.

Charlie stumbled backward and fell in the sand. “You’re so tall. You must be a pitcher.”

“Oh, you mean this?” he said, pointing to his jersey. “No, I’m just a fan. They don’t let genies try out for the team—believe me, I tried.”

“You’re a genie?”

“Sure. Who else lives in bottles but genies? That’s our thing.”

“What about granting wishes? That’s your thing too.”

“Sure, sure. So what do you got?”

“Huh?”

“What’s your wish, Ke-mo sah-bee? What’s your pleasure? How can I make your day?”

“I get three wishes, right?”

“Three?!” He stepped back and put his hands on his hips. “Kinda greedy, aren’t we?”

“Well, I thought that was how it worked.”

“Not with me, Buddy. That’s too much work.”

“But don’t you guys have to follow some kind of genie rules?”

The genie looked around, making sure they were still alone, and then leaned in to Charlie. “I’ve gone rogue.”

“That’s not fair. For the first time in my life I’ve found my own genie, and—”

“—listen to me, Boy. You’ll take your one wish and be happy with it or I’ll just turn you into dust

and go back into my bottle.”

“You could do that—turn me into dust?”

The genie laughed. “No, of course not.” His face turned serious. “Unless I really wanted to.”

“Well, if I can’t have the traditional three wishes, how about a two-part wish?”

“I knew you were gonna be trouble.”

“Aw, come on, genie.”

“Let’s hear it.”

---

“WAKE UP, Charlie, you’re going to be late for school.” Charlie’s mom banged on the door until he began to stir. He had forgotten all about his dreams.

Running into the school, he headed straight for his locker. The hallway was nearly empty. Hefton came around the corner. There was no escape.

“What are you doing out here, Loser? Don’t you know it’s time for class?” He punched Charlie in the stomach hard enough to take his breath away.

Charlie heard a voice. “Hit him.” He looked around. Where was it coming from?

“Hit him hard—now,” said the voice. Charlie recognized it: the genie. “Punch him in the face. Do it!”

Before Charlie could stop himself, his fist flew at Hefton’s face.

His mind could not fully process what was happening. In slow motion, he saw his fist crush Hefton’s chin, causing the bully’s head to twist violently to the side.

Hefton quickly regained his composure. “You think you can hurt me, you little sissy?”

Charlie knew he was a dead man.

“Go for the groin,” said the genie.

Charlie felt his foot go airborne—a Tomahawk missile racing inexorably to its target.

“Bull’s eye,” said the genie, laughing.

Hefton bent over, grabbing his crotch, clearly in excruciating pain.

“Knock him down. Kick his stomach. Laugh at him.”

Charlie followed every command to the letter.

“What are you doing?!”

He turned. It was the new girl, running toward

him.

“Kick him in the head, Charlie,” said the genie.

“Kill him!”

“Please, stop,” said the girl, sprinting directly at Charlie.

He felt his leg move backward.

The genie screamed in excitement. “This kick will send ol’ Hefton to the hospital, Charlie. Go for it!”

“Stop, Charlie!” said the girl.

Charlie hesitated, surprised that the girl knew his name.

“Do it, Charlie!” screamed the genie. “Do it now! He doesn’t deserve to live. Kill him!”

Charlie didn’t want to listen to the genie anymore. He wanted to listen to the girl—the new girl who actually knew his name. But his body was out of his control. His leg continued to move forward. His foot would connect with Hefton’s head at any moment and there was nothing he could do to stop—.

Something hit Charlie—hard, and he went flying backward. His head hit the floor.



---

“CHARLIE?”

His head was lying on a soft pillow. No—it was new girl’s lap! She was gently rubbing his forehead.

“I’m sorry, Charlie. I hope I didn’t hurt you too bad.”

“You didn’t hurt me.” He grinned. “Why do you think you hurt me?”

“I tackled you—because you were about to kick that kid’s head off. I could see it in your eyes: the rage. And I can’t say I blame you. I saw how he picked on you every day. But I couldn’t let you do it.”

“I don’t know what got into me.”

“We’ve never actually met. My name is Jeanie.”

He sat up and shook her hand. “You’re kidding me. Jeanie?”

“What?”

“Nothing, sorry.” Charlie stood up.

She got up. “So, are you okay?”

“I will be...if you’ll go out with me to a movie tomorrow night.” He smiled.

“Sorry, I’ve got plans.”

He frowned.

“I can’t miss a Rangers game.”

“You’re a Texas Rangers fan?”

“I’m a huge fan.”

“Crazy.”

“What? You have something against the Rangers?”

“No, not at all. But I’ve never been much of a sports fan.”

“Really? Come to the game with me. I’ll teach you to love baseball. Maybe I’ll even buy you a hot dog.”

“I do love hot dogs.”

“Great,” she said. “Then it’s a date.”

“There’s no tackling in baseball, right?”

She giggled. “I won’t tackle you anymore.”

“I kinda liked it.”

Jeanie pushed him hard and he nearly fell down.

They both started laughing.

---

CHARLIE AND JEANIE went to that Texas Rangers game, and many others. He fell in love with the game almost as quickly as he fell in love with her.

Charlie's dearest wishes came true—because of his Jeanie.

THE END

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## HORRORS OF MEMORY

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NINETY-YEAR-OLD MILDRED APPLEEE is thankful she still has an excellent memory—until a surgical procedure makes her blessing seem more like a curse. 1612 words.

---

“MRS. APPLEEE, have you had anything to eat or drink since midnight?”

“Well, let’s see. I had steak and eggs and two biscuits for breakfast,” said Mildred. “Oh, and two cups of coffee.”

The nurse stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m kidding. I know the rules. This is not my first surgery.”

Karen Applee glared. “Mom—behave.”

“Remember when you had your tonsils out, Honey, back in 1947? We bought you that Betsy Wetsy doll. Then we accidentally went off and left it at the hospital. And when your dad went back to get it, it was gone. You cried and cried for that doll.”

“Okay, Mom. No, I don’t remember that. But I believe you.” Karen turned to the nurse. “My mother has a memory like a computer.”

“And guess how old I am,” said Mildred.

The nurse checked the chart in her hand. “Says here you’re 90.”

“That’s right. And I never forget a thing.”

“Well, that’s very impressive,” said the nurse with no particular interest. “The anesthetist will be in shortly.” She turned and walked away.

“I hate being put under,” said Mildred to her

daughter.

“You’d rather be awake while they cut on you?”

“I think I could take it.”

A young female doctor walked in. “Hi, Mrs. Applee. I’m Dr. Johnson, your anesthetist.”

“Oh, Doctor, looks like my mother won’t be needing your services.”

“Karen,” said Mildred.

“Oh. You’re canceling the surgery?” said the doctor.

“No,” said Karen. “She wants to stay awake for the surgery.”

The doctor’s eyes widened.

“I was only kidding,” said Mildred. “My goodness, Karen—can’t you tell when I’m joking?”

Karen smiled at the doctor. “My mother is a big bluffer. Sometimes I just have to call her on it.”

The doctor smiled back, and then looked at Mildred. “Well, I can assure, Mrs. Applee, that you don’t want to have to bluff your way through this procedure.”

“No, of course not.” Mildred stuck out her tongue at her daughter.

Dr. Johnson assured Mrs. Applee that she would keep her comfortable throughout the surgery. Then she took out a syringe and injected a drug into Mildred's IV. "This will help you relax."

Two orderlies came in and unlocked the bed wheels and began rolling Mildred toward the surgery room.

"Love you, Honey. See you later."

"Love you, Mom."

---

"HOW ARE YOU FEELING, MOM?"

"Okay, I guess." Mildred surveyed the room.  
"How long was I in surgery?"

"About thirty minutes. But then you were in recovery for nearly two hours."

"Wow. I must have really been knocked out. What time is it?"

Karen checked her watch. "A little after five."

"Oh, my goodness. I can't believe I've been asleep all this time."

Karen looked confused. "Mom, you've been

awake. They brought you here to your room over an hour ago.”

“Did I say anything to you when they brought me in?”

“Yeah. You said you were thirsty. So, I gave you some Sprite. And then I fed you a few crackers.”

“Oh, yeah. Now I remember. My mouth so dry that I could barely swallow or even chew.”

“But the Sprite helped.”

“That’s right. Now it’s coming back.” Mildred thought for a few seconds. “Boy, when they put you out, you’re really out.”

“That’s what you want, Mom. It’s a lot better than feeling the knife.”

“But I don’t even remember rolling into the surgery room.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I remember saying goodbye to you and then...nothing.”

“That stuff works fast.”

“Oh, Karen, what about Ed? You need to get home and make your husband some dinner.”

“He can order pizza, Mom. It’s no big deal.”



“No, no, Honey. You get on home. I’m fine. Come see me in the morning.”

“Are you sure? We could come up tonight.”

“I appreciate that, Honey, but I’ll probably be sleeping anyway. If you come you’ll just be waking me up.”

“Well...okay—if you’re sure.”

---

MILDRED HAD BEEN asleep for forty minutes when she heard the elevator doors close. Two men, presumably orderlies, began to talk.

“So, it’s got to be tonight. Once I silence the alarm I can disconnect her and just let her fade away. Then I’ll reconnect everything and the alarm will go off. You just make sure nobody walks in on me.”

“Right.”

“Because remember: I’m taking most of the risk, but you’re getting half of the money.”

“Don’t worry, Man—I’ll have your back.”

Mildred took a peek. She saw one of the men

twisting a silver ring on his right index finger. She quickly closed her eyes. What money? she wondered. All she had was the house.

She heard the elevator doors open and felt herself being wheeled out, and down a hallway.

She could feel her body being transferred from the bed to the operating table.

After some talking in the distance that she couldn't quite make out, she heard: "Okay, then. Here we go."

Mildred recognized the voice. It was her surgeon.

She felt a sharp pain in her stomach.

No, wait—I'm awake! Help! Somebody help me! But she could not speak. She couldn't open her eyes.

She would scream, if only in her mind, until her face turned blue. Then the surgeon would notice, and stop cutting her.

Mildred jerked and woke up.

What a horrific nightmare. She gently touched the area of her surgery. It was the exact location as in her dream.

Then she noticed that the other bed was now

occupied.

“Hi, there, Neighbor. What’s your name? I’m Mildred.”

No answer.

“What are you in for?” Sounded like prison talk. Mildred felt like a prisoner after that nightmare.

Still no answer.

It would have been nice to have someone to talk to. A fellow veteran from the trenches of surgery.

A nurse walked in. “Here’s a little something to help you sleep, Mrs. Applee.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’m going to need any help.”

“Well, the doctor ordered it, so...”

As Mildred took the little paper cup with two pills in it, she prayed that the orderlies in her dream were not real. Who wanted to be sound asleep in a hospital where killers were roaming the halls?

She dumped the pills into her mouth.

The nurse handed her a glass of water, and Mildred drank part of it.

“Sweet dreams,” said the nurse, as she walked out.

Mildred stuck her finger into her mouth, dug the

two pills out from under her tongue, and stashed them under her pillow. She couldn't believe she had pulled it off—just like in the movies.

But after a few minutes, she got sleepy anyway and dozed off.

The stinky breath is what woke her up. Onion and garlic with a dash of stale tobacco. But she didn't open her eyes.

Then she heard the person walk away from her bed. She opened one eye just enough to see an orderly pushing buttons on the medical equipment that was hooked up to her roommate.

It hadn't been a dream after all. It was happening right now. The poor woman in the other bed was being murdered! She quietly reached for the button on her bedrail and pressed it. Aha! Gotcha, Sucker!

"May I help you?" said the nurse over the speaker.

"Help! He's trying to—"

A large hand clamped onto her mouth.

"It's okay, Jessie," said the orderly, "I'll handle it."

"Okay, thanks."

No, no, no! thought Mildred. He's killing that woman. And now he's going to kill me!

The orderly jabbed her arm with a syringe.  
She blacked out.

---

"MOM? MOTHER?"

Mildred suddenly woke up. "Oh, Karen. I'm so glad you're here." She checked to see if her roommate was okay. The bed was empty. There was no trace of the woman.

"What's the matter?"

"There was a woman in that bed last night. And this orderly came in and disconnected all her life support—and killed her."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"I saw him doing it. So, I pushed the button to call the nurse. But he covered my mouth and then shot me up with something."

"Do you realize how crazy you sound, Mom?"

"I don't care—it really happened."

"Alright. Fine. Let me go talk to the nurse."

Karen came back in five minutes. “There was never another patient in here with you, Mom. But you were yelling in your sleep last night. So, they gave you an extra dose of sleep medication.”

Mildred was stunned. Her memory was finally beginning to fail her. She hoped it was just a side effect of the drugs they gave her during surgery.

“When can I go home?”

“You’re already approved to go.”

“Good. Let’s get out of here.”

---

A NURSE and an orderly watched from a distance while another orderly rolled Mildred’s wheelchair into the elevator. Then Karen stepped in, and the doors closed.

The orderly said, “That poor old woman had terrible nightmares last night.”

“But I think she deserved to know the truth.”

“And what if she told the media her wild story? Just imagine some investigative reporter nosing around here asking all kinds of questions about an

orderly killing a patient. We have a hard enough time getting any respect.”

“I know.”

“It was just a crazy old woman’s nightmare. But the TV station would try to turn into a scandal—just for the ratings.”

“Yeah. But what if she finds out there really was another patient in the room with her? Then she’ll think we lied about it to cover up a murder.”

“Oh, come on—you can’t be serious.” A murder? Right here under our noses? That’s ridiculous,” said the orderly, as he twisted the silver ring on his right index finger.

THE END

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## SUDDEN FUTURE

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A BROTHER and sister are thrust into the future after playing around with some experimental equipment in the basement built by their mother, a physics professor. 6,248 words.

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RYAN EDISON STOOD at the back of a long line of junior high and high school students boarding the



school bus to go home. In two years he'd graduate and move on to better things—like college, in a different town where nobody knew about the time he got his head dunked into a toilet in the girls bathroom. Those stupid bullies were still laughing about that.

But least he wouldn't have to ride the bus with them anymore—not after next Thursday when he got his driver's license. His mom was giving him her old car. Ryan couldn't think of anything he loved her for more. Sure, she brought him into the world, gave him food and clothing and everything else he had—but his own car—that was the ultimate gift.

Just a few more days on this stinking bus.

His younger sister, Abby, was sitting in her usual spot with her BFF, Meg, right behind the driver.

She grinned at Ryan.

Sure, why shouldn't she be happy? Nobody was gonna try to embarrass her. He frowned at her and walked down the aisle, looking for an empty seat.

The only seat left was at the back, between Kevin and Carl.

“Don't worry, Ryan,” Kevin said with a wily

grin, “we saved you a seat, buddy.”

Ryan rescanned the entire bus. Surely there was another opening somewhere. But, no.

Melissa Myers was in the next-to-last row. She smiled at him.

Ryan was so in love with Melissa. He’d hardly spoken a word to her all year since she transferred in. They had four classes together and all he ever did was stare at her. Why was she smiling at him? He didn’t deserve it. She should have thought he was creepy—always looking at her, but never talking. Maybe she was just trying to be kind to the weirdo.

“Hey, Edison, hurry it up,” Carl said, “the bus ain’t going anywhere until you sit down.”

Kevin was pigging out on a large bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos. “Look at him—a skinny stick with fuzzy blond mop top. What does that remind you of?”

“I don’t know,” Carl said, grinning. “What?”

“He kinda looks like a big tampon, don’t you think?”

Some of the kids laughed.

Melissa looked away, obviously embarrassed.

The bus driver yelled, "Sit down back there!"

Ryan squeezed in between Kevin and Carl.

The bus pulled away from the school.

Kevin turned to Ryan and began talking. His mouth was three inches from Ryan's face. The nacho cheese breath burned his nose. "So, you like her?" He nodded to Melissa. "You like Melissa, don't you?" He grabbed Ryan's face with both hands and turned his head toward himself. "I can tell. I can see it in your eyes. You want to go out with her." He released Ryan's head and leaned up toward Melissa. "Melissa, would you go out with our boy, Ryan? He's kinda shy, so I'm trying to help him out. Is he the kind of guy you're looking for? Is he man enough for you?"

Melissa did not turn around or respond in any way.

"Leave her alone," Ryan said.

Kevin thumped Melissa on the back of the head with his finger. "I'm talking to you, girl."

"Stop it!" Ryan elbowed Kevin in the chest as hard as he could. He regretted it immediately.

Kevin tore into Ryan with his fists, battering him

in the stomach and face.

Carl pushed Ryan out of his seat onto the aisle floor.

Other boys began to offer advice. “Stomp his face! Kick him in the nuts!”

The bus driver yelled, “Stop that fighting!” He pulled over to the side of the road. “Whoever started the fight—get off of the bus. Now!”

“I started it.” Ryan got up from the floor, walked to the front of the bus, and got off. On the way out the door he apologized to the bus driver.

As the bus pulled away, Ryan saw Kevin pointing and laughing at him through the back window. Carl shot him the bird.

---

RYAN WALKED in the front door of his house and saw Abby sitting on the couch watching TV while talking on the phone, with her laptop sitting beside her.

Abby paused the TV show. “I’ll call you back in a minute.” She put her phone down and looked at Ryan. “Why did it take you so long to walk home?”

“I wasn’t in any hurry.”

“Needed time to think, huh? Why did you start a fight anyway?”

“Kevin Pilcher’s got a big, fat, dirty mouth.”

“He said something about Melissa, didn’t he?”

“What? No.”

Abby grinned. “I can tell when you’re lying, Ryan. You love her.”

“Shut up!” He walked over to the couch, picked up the remote, and turned off the TV. “You know you’re supposed to do all your homework before you turn the TV on.”

Abby pointed to her laptop. “I am doing my homework.”

“While watching TV and talking to Meg? I don’t think so.”

“I’m multitasking—and I’m very good at it.” Abby smirked.

“You’re way smarter than me, but you just don’t care. You do everything halfway just because you can get away with it.”

“I must be doing something right—my teachers love me.” She grinned proudly.

"Whatever." Ryan dropped the remote and the couch and walked over to the basement door.

"You're not supposed to go into Mom's lab unless she's down there."

"I need to use her computer to do research for my paper. My laptop is acting up again."

"Yeah, right. Research."

Ryan opened the basement door and went downstairs.

---

RYAN LOVED GOING down to his mother's lab. Tora Edison was a professor at the university. Her expertise in both physics and computer science gave the small school a double whammy for their money. But the work she did on campus was not nearly as interesting to Ryan as what she did in her home lab. He wondered if the other professors had any idea what she was up to.

He had helped his mother move most of the equipment to the basement, which would have been impossible to do were it not for the elevator she had

installed two years ago. The neighbors had been curious when they saw the elevator company truck out front. She had explained that was for her mother, who would be coming to live with us soon. It was a lie that nobody would have believed if they knew Grandma. She would live in her own house until the day she died.

The lab had a distinctive aroma of warm computers and natural gas powered backup generator that often kicked in when Tora was running one of her experiments. Ryan suspected they were breaking several zoning laws.

He wondered, but never asked, how his mother was able to pay for all this high tech stuff. The 3-D printer cost over \$35,000. He had googled it.

Tora's coolest invention was a device she called the *Galaxy Exploration Chair*. The chair itself was just a leather recliner. What made it special was the clear plastic helmet suspended over the chair. When you pulled it down over your head you could go just about anywhere. Signals were sent via the eyes to the brain, triggering all five senses. A basic test of the system transported the subject virtually to a field

of lilies. You could see and smell the flowers, feel the warm sun on your face, hear birds chirping nearby, pull a glade of grass and taste it. It was virtual reality at its best.

You could pop into another country, walk the streets, watch the people, listen. But they couldn't see you because you weren't really there.

You could even make a trip to outer space and float around for a while, observing planets. Although the space trips weren't very realistic since a person couldn't actually survive in outer space without a protective suit.

Tora had recently built a second Galaxy Exploration Chair so that Ryan and Abby could make virtual trips together. She would make notes as they reported their experiences real-time.

Ryan slid into one of the GECs and pulled the helmet down over his head. A holographic control panel appeared before his eyes. He reached out with his hand and touched the destination menu and selected Galaxy 7.

When he heard the door open at the top of the stairs, he knew it was Abby. It would be at least



another hour before his mother got home.

"You know we're not allowed to use the GECs unless Mom's here."

"I know exactly what I'm doing."

"She just called and told me she's going to be late."

"You've got to see this, Abby."

"What?"

"Get in the chair. You won't believe this. It's amazing."

"I don't want to get into trouble."

"Just for a minute. Try it. It's beautiful, really."

"Okay. But just for a second." She sat down in the chair and pulled the helmet over her head.

"I'll sync us." Ryan reached out to the holographic control panel and touched the Sync button.

"Wow," Abby said.

"That's what I'm saying."

"I've never seen anything like this," Abby said.  
"Which galaxy are we in?"

"I don't know. It's a new program. Mom must have just added it." He reached out to the control

panel and touched the Program menu. "Hey, I wonder what this Galaxy 8 is like? I'm switching us."

"No, don't switch me. I want to stay in this one."

"Just real quick, and then I'll take us back."

The display inside their helmets flashed, *Changing to Galaxy 8.*

"I don't see much difference in this one," Ryan said.

"This isn't pretty at all. Take us back to the other one."

"Fine." He tapped the Program menu. "Hey, I wonder what this is?"

Their helmets displayed, *Changing to Program X.*

"What are you doing, Ryan?" Abby asked.

Their displays went black and all of the lights in the basement went out.

Abby gasped.

"It's okay, Abby. Don't worry. The electricity just went out."

Something began to hum at the back of the basement.

"What's that?" Abby asked.

"The backup generator."

"So, why aren't the lights coming on?"

Their chairs began to vibrate. The displays in their helmets went from complete darkness to blinding light.

"Ryan, I'm scared."

The chairs shook violently.

"Get out of the chair!" Ryan yelled, trying to get his helmet off.

"I can't get this thing off," Abby shouted. "I can't even feel it on my head!"

"I can't feel mine either. I don't know what's happening." He looked over at Abby. All he could see was something that looked like a computer-generated outline of her body: a white, Abby-shaped grid glowing in the dark—with no hair on her head. His voice trembled. "Abby, something very weird is happening. Can you see me?"

She looked at him and screamed.

---

RYAN AND ABBY were sitting on a bench in an

ultramodern-looking shopping mall next to a large statue of a woman holding a shopping bag.

“Where are we?” Abby asked.

Ryan looked around. “Looks like Program X took us to some kind of future world.”

Abby felt her head with her hands. “I still can’t feel my helmet.”

“I can’t either.”

“What’s happening, Ryan? This is not like any of the other times. I’m scared.”

“It’s okay. I don’t know why we can’t feel the helmets.” He grinned. “But it’s a pretty cool upgrade. Makes this world seem so real. Excellent job, Mom.”

“It’s not cool to me,” Abby said. “I just want to go home.”

“We are home. We’re still sitting in the GECs in Mom’s lab. That’s what’s so cool about it—it seems like we’re really here.”

“I don’t like it being this real.”

“But we’re fine,” Ryan said, “so, let’s walk around and check this place out.”

“How are we gonna get back home? What if

we're stuck here forever?"

"Don't be silly. You know Mom's programs have that auto-return feature."

"But we've never needed it before. We were always able to get out of the program whenever we wanted to. How do we even know if the auto-return works?"

"I'm sure it works. Mom is a genius, you know. And besides, if anything goes wrong with that, she'll just bring us back manually when she gets home."

"And then we're gonna get grounded and I'm gonna miss Meg's party on Friday night. Why did I let you talk me into this?"

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it, so we might as well enjoy it. Hey, look at that candy store. Let's go see what kind of cool new candies they have in the future." Ryan got up and walked toward the candy store.

"Ryan, don't eat anything. You don't know what that stuff's made of." Abby got up and ran after him.

"Check these out." Ryan picked up a sucker labeled 'MagnaPopper' and unwrapped it.

"What are you doing? Don't get us in trouble."

“What are you talking about? Nobody can see us—remember? We can see them, but they can’t see us and they can’t touch us.”

“Are you sure? It feels different this time.”

Ryan popped the sucker into his mouth. “Wow. It’s got a super strong cherry taste.” He took the sucker out of his mouth to study it. “Wonder why they call them MagnaPoppers?”

“Looks just like a Tootsie Roll Pop,” Abby said.

The sucker slipped out of Ryan’s fingers and it flew into his mouth. He grabbed the sucker and pulled it back out. “What the heck?” He held it two inches from his mouth and let it go. The sucker flew back into his mouth. “This thing is magnetic.”

“Right, magnetic,” she said, smirking. “What—you think it’s got a magnet in the center instead of chocolate? That wouldn’t work unless you had metal in your head. Hmm—metal in your head. Actually, I’ve always wondered about that.”

“Shut up,” he said. “I don’t know what’s doing it, but something’s making it—”

“Hey, you didn’t pay for that.” A pudgy man stepped out from behind the counter.

Abby stared at Ryan. "I thought nobody could see us?"

"They can't," Ryan said. "Nobody can see us or touch us."

Abby punched him in the arm.

"Hey," Ryan said.

"I've never been able to do that before."

"Let's get out of here." Ryan threw the sucker toward the back of the store.

The man held up a small device and pushed a button. "You'll never get away from the mall cop."

Ryan and Abby ran for the exit.

A mall cop zoomed up on a cart. "Halt, please."

He stepped off of the cart.

Ryan noticed that the cart didn't have any wheels. "Cool. What keeps it suspended—some type of magnetic field?"

"Don't play dumb with me," the cop said. "Every first grader knows how these things work."

Ryan bent down to look under the cart. "Amazing."

"You two have been reported as shoplifters."

Ryan shrugged. "No, Sir, there's been a mistake."

It wasn't us." The MagnaPopper Ryan had thrown away in the store flew through the air, barely missing Abby's head, and popped into Ryan's mouth.

The cop smiled. "Gotcha."

Ryan took the sucker out of his mouth and handed it to the cop.

The cop scanned the sucker with some type of electronic device.

"What are you doing to it?" Ryan asked.

"Disabling the anti-theft seed. That's why it kept popping into your mouth."

"I thought it was magnetic. Isn't that why they call them 'MagnaPoppers?'"

The cop laughed. "No, that's just the brand. I think the 'Magna' has to do with the strong flavor." He handed the sucker back to Ryan.

Ryan held it near his mouth and let it go. It fell to the floor.

The cop laughed. "Might as well pick it up and eat it. Your parents will be billed for it."

"I don't think so," Abby said under her breath.

"What did you say, Miss?"



“I’m sorry. Nothing, Sir.”

“It’s nine o’clock,” the cop said. “Why aren’t you two in school?”

“Nine o’clock in the morning?” Abby asked. “No, that’s not right—it’s like five o’clock. School’s already out.”

The cop spoke into his wristwatch. “Hey, Joe, I’ve got two more truants for you.”

“Okay, bring them out. I’ll be right there to pick them up.”

“Wait,” Ryan said, “we’re not truants. Didn’t you hear what my sister said? We already went to school today. We rode the bus home.”

“If you rode the bus home, then what are you doing here?”

“We don’t know,” Abby said. “We were just playing around in my mom’s lab and—”

“Lab?” The cop’s brows went up.

Ryan jumped into the cart. “That’s enough, Abby. The nice officer has been patient with us. We need to quit playing around.”

Abby sat down in the cart next to her brother.

The cop got into the driver’s seat. “Here we go.”

As they rode through the mall, Abby leaned over to Ryan and said, "I've been to a lot of malls, but I've never heard of most of these stores." She saw a woman who looked like her best friend, Meg, but all grown up, spritzing potential customers with perfume outside a store. It was funny to think of her friend doing that kind of work. She and Meg were planning to go to college and medical school together.

"Look at that," Ryan said. "A 120-inch flat screen TV for five-hundred dollars. And check out that escalator."

"What are they standing on?" Abby asked. "People are going up, but I don't see anything under their feet."

"This place is very weird," Ryan said.

The mall cop pulled up alongside similar cart labeled 'Truant Police.'

The mall cop said, "Okay, kids, this is Officer Joe. He'll take you to your school."

"Hop on," Officer Joe said.

Ryan and Abby got out of the mall cop's cart and into Officer Joe's, which had bucket seats.

“This feels strange,” Abby said.

“Yeah,” Ryan said. “It’s like something is pushing you down into the seat.”

“Sounds like your passenger protectors have engaged, so here we go,” Officer Joe said.

Abby stared at Ryan. *Passenger protectors?*

Ryan shrugged.

The cart accelerated quickly to around sixty miles per hour. Ryan hoped the passenger protectors worked, since the cart had no doors and no top.

“Could I please have your names? Officer Joe asked.

“I’m Ryan Edison, and this is my sister, Abby.”

Officer Joe glanced at Ryan in the mirror. “So, Ryan, I’m guessing you’re in ninth grade.”

“Tenth.”

“Okay, close.” Officer Joe smiled. “Let’s see if I can do better with your sister.”

“I’m in the tenth grade, like my brother,” Abby said.

Ryan wondered why she was lying. “Abby—”

Abby elbowed her brother. “I’m a year younger than Ryan, but I skipped second grade.”

“Oh, now why did you have to go and tell me?” Officer Joe asked. “I like guessing.”

“Oh,” Abby said. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Officer Joe said, winking at her in the mirror.

Abby whispered to Ryan and pointed. “Is that the school?”

They were headed toward a huge metal dome, two-hundred feet tall.

“Can’t be,” Ryan said.

As they approached the dome, a section of the wall slid open, creating a doorway. The cart entered a huge lobby.

Abby said, “You know he’s gonna take us to the principal’s office. What are we going to tell them?”

“How should I know?” Ryan spotted the principal’s office, with its glass walls. Then he realized that all of the interior walls of the school were made of glass.

They rode right past the principal’s office, and then past a classroom labeled ‘First Grade.’

“Uh, Sir,” Ryan said, “I think you’ve brought us to the wrong school.”

Officer Joe shook his head.

Ryan and Abby looked at each other, confused.

The cart began to lift off the floor, accelerating as it rose: ten feet...twenty-five feet...

Abby leaned in close to her brother and grabbed his hand. "I'm scared."

He put his arm around her.

The cart continue upward. Seventy-five feet... one-hundred feet...one-hundred-fifty feet. It suddenly came to a stop at about one-hundred-seventy-five feet above the lobby floor.

A glass door opened to the fourth floor hallway and Officer Joe drove through it and down the hall to a classroom door labeled 'Tenth Grade.'

Ryan whispered to Abby, "They only have one school—for all the grades?"

"And is there seriously only one tenth grade classroom—in this whole gigantic school?"

"But look how big it is," Ryan said.

There were rows and rows of students—hundreds of them—sitting at what appeared to be computers.

The cart pulled up to a counter and stopped.

Ryan and Abby felt their passenger protectors release.

“Out you go,” Officer Joe said. “Mrs. Flatback, this is Ryan and Abby. They seemed to have forgotten it was a school day.”

A young woman standing behind a long, marble-top counter smiled and said, “Thanks, Joe.”

Ryan and Abby stepped out of the cart and Officer Joe drove it out of the classroom.

Mrs. Flatback said, “Okay, sign yourselves in and get to your workstations.”

They walked up to the counter.

Ryan looked for a sign-in sheet and a pen. All he saw was something that looked like a touch pad that was built into the counter.

“What are you waiting for?” Mrs. Flatback asked.

“I’m not sure what to do,” Ryan said.

“Very funny.” Mrs. Flatback grabbed Ryan’s right hand and pressed his index finger against the pad. It beeped. She checked her monitor. “That’s odd.” She looked at Abby. “You give it a try, young lady.”

Abby pressed her right index finger against the

pad.

It beeped.

Mrs. Flatback snapped her fingers. “Mr. Hall? Mr. Hall, I need you up here.”

A man who had been talking to a student near the back of the classroom waved at Mrs. Flatback and began to walk toward the front of the room. Ryan judged him to be at least ninety.

When he finally made it to the counter, Mrs. Flatback said, “We’ve got a serious problem here, Mr. Hall. These two students are not registered in our system.”

“I see.” Mr. Hall eyed them suspiciously.

“So, you know what that means, Mr. Hall.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I certainly do. And I’ll take care of them. Come with me, children.”

*Children?* Ryan was not a child, and he had no interest in going anywhere with this old man. He and Abby had played along with these people for long enough. Ryan wanted to grab Abby’s hand and run out of the school, but he wasn’t even sure how to get back down to ground level.

Mr. Hall led them to an escalator, and just like

the one they'd seen in the mall, it had no stairs—but this one went down in a spiral.

The invisible stairs felt spongy. Ryan nearly lost his balance, grasping for the handrail to keep him from falling on top of Mr. Hall.

Down, down, down they went in a circular motion. It seemed it would never end.

"I'm getting dizzy," Abby said.

"Whatever you do, don't close your eyes," Mr. Hall said.

When they got to the ground floor, Mr. Hall led them to the principal's office.

"Mrs. Davis, these two students do not appear to be in our system."

"I'll take care of it," Mrs. Davis said, smiley politely at Abby and Ryan.

"Thank you very much." Mr. Hall walked out of the office.

Mrs. Davis placed a touch pad on top of the counter. "Let's give it another try."

Abby stepped up and press her finger to the pad. It beeped.

A man walked up from behind her. "What's the



problem, Mrs. Davis?”

Ryan assumed he was the principal.

“Mr. Pilcher, these students don’t seem to be in our system.”

Ryan’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. Mr. Pilcher? *Kevin Pilcher*? The principal was around forty. But he looked suspiciously like Ryan’s bus riding nemesis, Kevin Pilcher. It made him wonder if Kevin’s sidekick, Carl, was the assistant principal. He nearly started laughing at the thought of it. This wasn’t just a future world—it was a wacky world.

“Let Melissa handle this,” Mr. Pilcher said, walking over to a doorway and talking to someone inside the room. “We’re having more problems with the system.”

A strikingly beautiful woman walked out. “I’ll take care of it.”

Ryan’s jaw dropped as she stepped to the counter. It was Melissa Myers, the girl he was madly in love with—whom he had never spoken a word to—now in her late thirties, and more gorgeous than ever.

She eyed Ryan and then Abby. “So, our system

doesn't like you today, huh?" She smiled warmly. "Let's just see if we can get it to cooperate." She began typing at the keyboard.

Ryan spotted her name tag: *Melissa Pilcher - Associate Principal*. No, it couldn't be. She wouldn't have married Kevin Pilcher—not in a million years. "Your last name is Pilcher—the same as the principal's."

"That's because he's my husband. That's the way it works." She smiled. "Now, let's try it with you, uh..." She nodded at Ryan.

"Ryan. Ryan Edison." He was about to puke. How could she stand to even be near Kevin Pilcher, much less be willing to kiss him and...

She flinched. "Ryan Edison?"

Did she remember him? "Yes, Ma'am." He couldn't believe he was calling her 'Ma'am.' But she was old enough to be his mother!

"Okay, Ryan, please press your right index finger on the touch pad."

It beeped.

Melissa shook her head. "Hmm." She looked at Abby. "What's your name, honey?"

“Abby Edison.”

“Brother and sister. Okay, Abby give it a try.”

When Abby pressed her finger against the pad, it beeped.

“Hmm.” Melissa shook her head as she studied her monitor.

Ryan leaned across the counter and spoke softly so that nobody by Melissa could hear him. “Why did you marry him?”

Melissa looked stunned. “What?”

“How could you marry that...that...butt pimple?”

Melissa stepped back, shocked. “Excuse me?”

Ryan raised his voice. “You knew what kind of guy he was: a mean bully who liked to embarrass kids and beat them up. How could you fall in love with somebody like that?”

“Ryan, stop,” Abby said, tugging at his arm. “Let’s just go.”

Ryan and Abby stormed out of the office.

“Stop!” Melissa shouted. “You’re not allowed to leave the building without permission.”

Ryan heard Melissa telling a guard to go after

them.

“Run,” Ryan said.

They ran to the main door.

“How do we open it?” Abby asked.

“Maybe this will do it.” Ryan pointed to a big red button.

“It says it’s for emergencies only,” Abby said.

“Perfect.” Ryan rammed it with the palm of his hand.

The door slid open.

They ran out.

“There’s a taxi.” Ryan ran to the side of the road and waved to the cabbie.

Abby caught up with him. “Do you have any money?”

“No.”

“Then how are we going to—”

“I’ll handle it.”

Other than the color, the taxi looked like Officer Joe’s cart.

“Where to?”

“1514 Maple Avenue,” Ryan said, looking back to see if the school guard had come out of the

building yet.

“1514? No. There’s no such address.”

“Yes, there is,” Abby said. “That’s where we live.”

The guard ran out of the school waving his hands and yelling.

“We need to get going now,” Ryan said. “Just drop us off somewhere close to that address.”

The driver pulled away just before the guard reached them.

Ryan was blabbing to Abby in a loud voice about how much he hated school to drown out the sound of the guard yelling for the driver to stop.

---

THE CAB PULLED up in front of Maxi Mall and stopped.

“This is where we were this morning,” Abby said.

“Why did you bring us here?” Ryan asked.

“You told me to take you close to 1514 Maple Avenue.”

“That’s right,” Ryan said.

“Well, this mall takes up the entire 1500 block.”

“Then where’s our house?” Abby began to cry.

“I don’t know, Abby,” Ryan said.

“And where’s Mom?”

The driver turned around. “Hey, I don’t want to hear about your problems. Just pay up and get out of my cab!”

“We don’t have any money,” Ryan said, as they got out.

“Figures.” The cabbie shook his head and drove away.

“Quit crying,” Ryan said. “Everything’s gonna be fine. I’m sure Mom will be home soon, and then she’ll bring us back.”

“But maybe she can’t do it unless we’re in that same spot we were in when we came here.”

“Okay, that kinda makes sense,” Ryan said. “Let’s go back to it.”

They ran inside the mall.

“Look out,” Ryan said. “There’s a mall cop.”

They hid behind a column until he drove by.

Abby said, “Look at that woman over there in

the store. She looks like Meg.”

“Your best friend, Meg?”

“Yeah. Could it be her, all grown up—like Melissa?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m gonna find out.”

“But we need to get back to our spot.”

“We will. But first I’ve got to do this.” Abby bolted toward the clothing store.

“Hang on. I’m coming with you,” Ryan said.

Abby walked up behind the woman, who was straightening T-shirts on a display shelf. “Meg?”

The woman turned around. “May I help you?”

“Meg, it’s me—Abby.”

“I’m sorry, Miss, but I don’t believe I know you.”

“Sure, you do, Meg.”

“And why are you calling me Meg? I haven’t gone by that since high school.”

“Exactly. You and I were best friends in school. I’m Abby Edison.”

“You’re Abby’s daughter? I didn’t know Abby had a daughter. Of course, I haven’t seen her in years.”

“How could that be? We were bff’s—you know, best friends forever. What happened?”

“Why do you keep saying that we were friends?”

“I mean you and my mother were such good friends. That’s what I meant.”

“Well, after I dropped out of college my freshman year, we sort of lost touch.”

“Why did you drop out of college?” Abby asked. “You were gonna be a doctor.”

“College was a lot tougher than high school.”

“But you were so smart.”

Meg stared at her.

“My mom said you were.”

“Well, I do regret it now. I should have taken my studies more seriously. Too much partying. But I have to say that I was truly shocked when I found out your mom had dropped out.”

“I dropped—I mean, my mom dropped out of college?”

“The next year,” Meg said. “She never told you?”

“It seems like there’s a lot I don’t know about my mother.”

Ryan went over to Abby. “The mall cop’s coming



this way.”

“Ryan?” Meg looked stunned. “No, you’re Ryan’s son. This is very weird.”

“I’m sorry, Meg,” Ryan said, “but we’ve got to go.” He grabbed Abby’s hand.

“Well, tell your mom to give me a call sometime.”

They hid at the front of the store.

The mall cop walked into the store and over to Meg, and appeared to be flirting with her.

Ryan and Abby ran out the door.

“Aren’t we just attracting attention by running?” Abby asked.

“Probably.”

They slowed to a walk.

A voice from behind them said, “You kids stop right there!”

Ryan turned around and saw the mall cop getting in his cart.

“Go!” Ryan said.

They ran to the food court at the center of the mall.

“I think it’s that way.” Ryan pointed to the right.

The cop turned left, but then apparently realized they had gone the other way and turned around. Now he was gaining on them. “There’s no use in running. You can’t get away from me. Stop!”

They saw the statue, ran to it, and sat down on the bench.

“Okay, Mom, we’re ready,” Ryan said. “Take us now.”

Nothing happened.

“Mom, please!” Abby screamed.

---

RYAN BLACKED OUT FOR A MOMENT, and when he opened his eyes he was in the basement of his house—in his mom’s lab. He glanced to his side. Abby was there too, sitting in the other GEC.

“Oh, Mom,” Abby said, pulling off her helmet and running to her mother’s arms.

Ryan took off his helmet and got up from his chair. “Mom, that Program X is—”

“Amazing?” Tora said, smiling.

“Did you just get home?” Abby asked.

“No, I’ve been watching for a while.”

“But, Mom,” Ryan said, “we were scared half to death in that freaky future world you built.”

“You were never in any danger,” Tora said. “You were sitting right here.”

“Could you see what was happening to us?” Abby asked.

“I couldn’t see anything,” Tara said. “I want you to tell me all about it.”

“Meg was there,” Abby said. “She was real old—almost as old as you.”

“Gee, thanks,” Tara said.

“She was working in a mall. I talked to her. She told me she had dropped out of college. But she’s planning on being a doctor, Mom. It was awful.”

“And we ran into Melissa,” Ryan said.

“That new girl you like,” Tora said. “Have you still not told her you like her?”

“He’s never even talked to her,” Abby said.

“She was married to Kevin Pilcher—that stupid bully from the bus. How could she marry him?”

“Yeah,” Abby said, “and Meg told me that I dropped out of college too.”

“Excellent,” Tora said, smiling.

“No,” Abby said, “it was a nightmare.”

“Why are you smiling, Mom?” Ryan asked.

“Because it sounds like my program worked exactly as it was suppose to,” Tara said. “The things that frightened you in my program are the things that you fear the most about your future. Abby, I keep warning you that if you don’t start taking your studies seriously it could jeopardize your dreams of being a doctor. And Ryan, you need to stand up to that bully, and if you really like that girl, you need to let her know—or you might regret it someday.”

“But how did the program know about that stuff?” Abby asked.

“You hard-coded it in that way just for us, didn’t you?” Ryan asked.

“No—although I could have, since I know you two so well. But I wanted the program to be able to sense your fears and turn them into dramatic scenarios that would teach you the lessons you need to learn.”

“So that it could be used to help other kids too,” Ryan said.

“Right,” Tara said. “And even adults.”

“I guess it worked then,” Abby said, “cause all I want to do right now is go study—as soon as I call Meg.”

“No,” Tara said. “You can’t tell anybody about my experiments. You know that.”

“Oh, right,” Abby said. “I won’t. Don’t worry, Mom. I’m just glad to be home—and I’m glad I’m not old.”

Tara smirked at her.

“Well, I know what I’m gonna do,” Ryan said, heading for the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Tara asked.

“I won’t tell anybody, Mom, I promise.” Ryan went out the door.

---

RYAN RODE his bicycle in the dark to Melissa Myer’s house. From a distance, he saw a couple sitting out front in a double seated swing. The porch light was off, but even in the faint light beaming from a window, he recognized Melissa. The guy’s back was

to him. Surely it wasn't Kevin Pilcher. Had it already begun? Was he too late?

He dropped his bicycle in the front yard and ran toward the porch. "Stop! You can't have her, you stinking—."

The guy turned around. It wasn't Kevin.

And Melissa...wasn't Melissa.

The man said, "Can I help you, son?"

"I'm sorry, Sir," Ryan said. "I thought you were somebody else."

"Somebody who stinks?"

The woman laughed.

"No—I mean, that's not what I meant," Ryan said, feeling like a complete idiot.

"Are you looking for Melissa?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Ryan said.

"I'm her mom and this is her dad."

"Oh," Ryan said. "Good to meet you."

"Melissa? You've got company," her mother yelled.

"Thanks," Ryan suddenly realized that he had no idea what he was going to say to Melissa. He'd

never spoken to her. This needed to be perfect. Perfect. Why hadn't he taken the time to write out a little speech? He only had one shot and this was it, and he was about to blow it. This was why he had never spoken to her—because he'd never come up with the perfect words. She was so beautiful and wonderful—she deserved perfect words. But he didn't have any the perfect words for her. He didn't have any words. What the heck was he doing here?

Melissa opened the door. "Hi, Ryan."

He gulped. "You know my name?" *Those were his first words to her? Those weren't perfect words—they were stupid words, you idiot!*

"Of course." She smiled.

Her dad said, "Invite him in for a Coke, so your mom and I can get so privacy out here."

"Oh, Phil." Melissa's mom laughed.

"Come on in," Melissa said.

Ryan walked through the doorway of his new future. *Thanks, Mom—you're amazing.*

THE END

## DEAD TO THE WORLD

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A WOMAN'S sleeping pill allows her cheating husband to go on nightly adventures. 826 words.

---

IT'S BEEN thirty minutes since we turned out the lights. Misty will be stone cold asleep in another fifteen. Dead to the world. She used to toss and turn all night long. Neither of us slept a wink. Then her



doctor came to the rescue with his prescription pad.

That magic little pill knocks her out for eight full hours. Oh, the wonders of modern medicine. I could crank up a jackhammer right here in the bedroom and she'd sleep right through it. Seriously.

So you'd think I'm getting a full night's sleep these days, right? Wrong. I found something much more interesting to do at night. It's called cheating.

I'm sick of being married to Misty, but I won't divorce her—not until the clock runs out on that stupid prenup she made me sign. Two more weeks and I'm free. I'll walk away with half of her fortune.

It started with just one night a week. I'd meet a hooker at a downtown hotel, and then pop back here, sleep a couple of hours and get up for work. Not that I really work.

It's Misty's company, and she made me Vice President of Special Projects. So, what are my special projects? Whatever the hell I want them to be, which currently is throwing paper wads at my trash can.

After a while, the one-hooker-per-week thing got boring. So I stepped up to two nights a week, then three. These days I have a different lover for each

night of the week. Is this the perfect life or what? And Misty doesn't suspect a thing. Little twit.

But don't I feel guilty for treating my wife this way? Hey, it's not my fault that she was dumb enough to marry me. She should have known better. But then, how could she resist—I am a major hunk.

Of course, my seven girlfriends are even more stupid than Misty. Each one of them actually thinks I'm going to marry her. Why should I? Once I have all that money, I'll be able to get any woman I want, any time I want. No need to settle for just one. Been there. Done that.

Misty's been perfectly still for a few minutes. I'll give her a couple more before I get up, change clothes, and drive to the hotel.

Room 523. Can't wait. Libby is smoking hot. I usually give her five hundred—not that she asks for it. She's no hooker. I give her money out of the goodness of my heart, as I do with all my girls.

Okay, time to go. Wait—the lights came on. Misty's awake. How did this happen? She should be sound asleep. She's using the phone. I'll hold still and pretend I'm sleeping.

“Hey. I did it.”

Who is she talking to at this hour?

“Don’t worry—he can’t hear me.”

Yes, I can. I can hear everything you’re saying.

“I know. I can’t believe I did it either.”

Did what?

“But he was cheating on me.”

Uh-oh. She knows.

“And I hate being played for a fool.”

This is crazy. Does she really think I can’t hear her?

“Yeah, I’m about to call—in just a minute.”

What is going on?

“That was a brilliant idea—to spike his whiskey with some of my sleeping pills. I crushed them up like you said, and he didn’t notice a thing. All it took was three. Those little babies are extremely dangerous.” She giggled.

You bitch! The joke’s on you. It didn’t work. I’m alive, and I’m hearing everything you’re saying. This is attempted murder. You’re gonna rot in prison. Now I’ll get ALL of your money. Ha!

And now for the big surprise. I can’t wait to see

the expression on her face...Why can't I move?...I can't even open my eyes...But if my eyes are closed, how am I seeing everything?

"I'm waiting a few extra minutes to make sure he's really dead."

I'm not dead.

"I sure wouldn't want the paramedics to be able to shock him back to life."

Huh?

"What if he's having an out-of-body experience right now? Wouldn't that be funny? Maybe he's looking down, hearing how I killed him, seeing his dead body lying here beside me, wishing he could jump up and strangle me." She looked up at the ceiling and shot it the finger.

No!

"That would be hilarious."

You don't want to do this, Misty. I love you, Honey. Please call 9-1-1 now. Please!

"But wait—I don't need to call now. I don't have to worry about time of death. How would I know he had died? I was asleep. In fact, I could wait until morning to call 9-1-1. Then I'd be absolutely sure he

was really dead.”

No, please! I’m fading, Misty. I can barely see you now. Please call..before it’s..too late...

THE END

## IMPALA CRUISE

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A YOUNG WOMAN offers a ride to a stranger, knowing she may regret it. He's good-looking. But he could be a criminal. He could be dangerous. So could she. 5,629 words.

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THE YOUNG CLERK smiled at Obadiah as he entered the convenience store. He already felt guilty about

what he was about to do. Her smile had just made it that much more difficult. He went straight to the back and began eyeing the wall of refrigerated beer. His whole body vibrated with anticipation, even as his blood sugar level plummeted.

How had he sunk this low? Had he lost all sense of morality? Obadiah brushed his guilt aside. The only way to pull it off was to do it without thinking. He wanted to be back on the road in two minutes, with a cold beer in hand, an open bag of Fritos on the seat beside him, and wads of cash stuffed in his coat pockets. Unfortunately, he no longer owned a car.

Just do it. He opened the glass door and grabbed a six-pack of Budweiser.

Then he heard somebody walk into the store. He froze. The police, he thought. Somehow the clerk had suspected him and called for help. Why had he been so foolish? It was after 11:00 p.m., and this was a small town, so he thought it would be easy.

Then he heard a man's voice.

"Give me a pack of Marlboro Reds."

Obadiah relaxed. It was just a customer. And the

man would never even know Obadiah was there. Since there were no cars parked out front, the guy would assume he was the only customer.

“Now give me all your money, Bitch!”

“Please...please don't shoot me—I have a two-year old.”

“Hurry up! Just dump the whole drawer in the bag.”

“Okay, okay. But there's not much in here. Most of the money is in the safe.”

“Then crack it open!”

Obadiah wished he was anywhere but here. The guy sounded crazy. Would he kill the girl?

“But...I don't know the combination.”

Obadiah bent over and tiptoed to the middle aisle to take a look. He could either continue to hide and be safe, or try to help the girl and possibly die. No! I just can't deal with this right now, he thought. His head throbbed. His hands began to shake.

“Yes, you do,” shouted the man with the gun. “And you're gonna open it right now or I'm gonna blow your head off!”

The girl began to sob. “Please don't hurt me.”



Obadiah stayed low as he hurried up the aisle. Just as he was about to grab the man's arm from behind and try to wrestle the gun away from him, the girl spotted him.

Her eyes tipped off the robber. He spun around.

Obadiah grabbed the man's right arm with both of his hands, and the pistol went off. The bullet blew past Obadiah's ear, and tore into the ceiling.

The girl hit the floor and pushed the silent alarm button.

The man struggled to break free. But Obadiah knew if he let go he was dead.

The man jabbed Obadiah in the face with his left fist.

Obadiah grabbed the man's left forearm, leaving only one hand to control the gun. He felt weak. He hadn't eaten all day. Adrenaline was no longer enough. He was losing the battle. Soon a red-hot chunk of metal would be lodged in his brain.

Maybe it was for the best. He deserved to die. But what about the girl? The robber would have to kill her too. He fought back with renewed strength. But he knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

The robber gasped and looked down.

Obadiah looked too, and saw what appeared to be the tip of a steel-toed work boot—jammed deep into the man’s crotch from behind.

Obadiah quickly took advantage of the man’s weakness, snatching the gun away.

The man bent over in agony, holding himself with both hands, assessing the damage.

The same work boot that had flattened his manhood kicked him in the back. He fell to the floor.

His assailant was a woman—5-foot-6, with short brown hair, wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and...steel-toed boots. She was cute—in a kiss me, and I’ll break your arm kind of way. Right now, Obadiah wouldn’t care if she broke his arm. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She took out her cell phone. “Now keep the gun on him while I call the police.”

The clerk peeped up from behind the counter. “I’ve already called them.”

The police arrived moments later, took statements, and hauled the man away.

The young clerk repeatedly thanked Obadiah and the boot woman. The police had taken her

name, but Obadiah didn't catch it. He had been too busy answering the questions of another officer.

The boot woman walked out and got into her big blue, 1970-something car.

Obadiah began walking along the road, wondering how long he would survive without food. He tried not to think about the beer and Fritos.

The big blue car passed him and pulled over.

When he reached the car and looked in through the open passenger window, she said, "Get in."

Oh, Lady, he thought, you think I'm a nice guy because I tried to stop the robbery and save that clerk. I'm not nice. You need to stay away from me.

But even in the dim light of the instrument panel he saw an irresistible sparkle in her eyes.

Obadiah opened the door and got in.

He buckled his seat belt as she drove out onto the road. "Thanks again for saving me back there."

"No problem," she said. "I heard you tell the cop that your name is Obadiah Cross. Obadiah's from the Bible, isn't it?"

"Yes."

“So, what are you—some kind of preacher?”

“Look, just because your parents named you after somebody in the Bible, it doesn’t mean you’ll grow up religious.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Not every Mary is a virgin.”

He looked straight ahead.

She studied his face. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What? Am I a preacher?” He hesitated. “No.” Not anymore, he thought.

“Well, you look like one.”

“No, I don’t. And what about you? I’ll bet your name doesn’t say anything about who you are either. What is your name? I never caught it.”

“Impala.”

“Oh, come on. You can do better than that. If you’re going to lie about it, at least make it believable.”

“I’m not lying. That’s my name.”

“Really? You don’t think I know what kind of car this is? I’m not much of a car guy, but the logo’s right here on the dash. I saw it when I got in. So, what’s your last name? Chevy? Are you Miss Impala

Chevy?”

“No, of course not. That wouldn’t work. The correct order is Chevy Impala.”

“Okay. Then what is your last name?”

“Cruise.”

He checked to see if she was smiling. She was not. He began to laugh.

It didn’t faze her. “Go ahead. Get it out of your system.”

“You’re serious. Your name is really ‘Impala Cruise.’”

“That’s right.”

“Why? Why in the world—”

“—would my parents give me such a crazy name? Most people ask me if they were on drugs at the time.”

“Well—yeah. That would explain it.”

“Actually, it made perfect sense to name me Impala...since I was born in the back seat of the car.”

“Your mom didn’t make it to the hospital in time.”

“Hey, when I’m ready to go, nobody’s gonna stop me. I’ve always been that way.”

“So, who delivered you? Your dad?”

“Yep. And that’s why he could never bring himself to get rid of this car. He just kept fixing it up.”

“This car?” He turned to take a look at the back seat. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

Obadiah had guessed twenty-one. He was twenty-six.

“This is a ‘72 model. It was my sixteenth birthday present.”

“Okay. Glad to meet you, Impala.”

She nodded.

“But you made up the last name, right? You don’t want to give me your real last name because then I could track you down later. You’re scared of me.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m scared of you,” she said sarcastically. “That’s why I busted the bad guy’s balls for you. That’s why I gave you a ride—because I’m scared to death of you.”

“You’re right. I’m being stupid.”

“You’re probably just hungry. You can’t think

straight. How about a hamburger?"

"That sounds great."

She pointed to a McDonald's billboard. It was five miles ahead.

"Only thing is...I don't have any money."

"They take credit cards."

"Mine are all maxed out."

She thought for moment. "How were you going to buy that beer at the convenience store if you didn't have any money?"

"I was...uh..."

"You were gonna rob it. You're no better than that other guy. He just beat you to it. I should have let him shoot you."

Obadiah hung his head.

She let him mope for a while and then punched him in the arm. "Get over it. I'll pay for the burgers."

"Why? I'm a criminal. Don't you want to pull over and throw me out of your car?"

"I should."

"Do it."

"Nope. Gotta get you back home safe and sound."

“I don’t have a home.”

“Yeah, you do. In Beaumont.”

He stared at her. “What makes you think I’m from Beau-mont? It’s 200 miles from here.”

She looked as if she realized she’d said too much.

“Zeela sent you. I should have known. How much is she paying you?”

“Zeela? Who’s that?”

“Don’t play dumb. It’s too late for that.”

“She’s not paying me anything.”

“Oh, I get it. You’re working off a debt. You jumped bail and now you’re having to pay her back.”

“She’s a friend.”

“My mother doesn’t have any friends. She helps creeps get out of jail—for money.”

“It’s a legitimate business.”

“It’s a racket.”

“Fine. Whatever. She’s worried about you. That’s why I came.”

“Well, you just go back and tell her to mind her own business. I don’t need her pity.”

“It’s not pity.”



“Pull over.” He reached for the door handle, as though he might jump out before she even slowed down.

She eased up on the accelerator. “What about the hamburger? And fries?”

“I don’t care.” But he couldn’t convince himself—much less her.

“Let’s eat first. Then we can go our separate ways.”

Obadiah didn’t care if he ever saw Zeela again. As long as he stayed away, he could blame all his troubles on her. If she had just let him live his life as he saw fit, and not tried to control him, things could have turned out so differently.

He sensed a car approaching from the rear and turned around. The headlights blinded him.

Impala glared into the rear view mirror. “What’s your problem, Man? If you’re in such a hurry, just pass me.”

Obadiah froze. Was it him? Had he seen Obadiah getting into the car? What if he had a gun?

The car raced around them and speed away.

Obadiah sighed, “Whew.”

“What?”

“That car...he almost hit us.”

“If he had, he would have been sorry.”

“What do you mean?”

“This thing is a tank. It’s forty-three-hundred pounds of heavy-duty steel. They don’t make ‘em like this anymore.”

“No, I guess not.”

False alarm. But he knew his killer was coming. It was only a matter of time.

---

OBADIAH GOBBLED DOWN two Big Macs, a super-sized fry, and a Coke while Impala ate her chicken sandwich. Every few seconds, his eyes did a quick scan of the room. “Ever feel like somebody’s watching you?”

“I’m watching you,” she said. “And it ain’t pretty.”

“I’m sorry. I was starving.” He sucked down the last of his soft drink. “I need to...make a call.”

“Okay. Wanna borrow my cell?”

“Not that kind of call.” He nodded toward the restrooms.

Oh, I get it, she thought, euphemism. “Local or long distance?”

“Long distance, I’m afraid.”

“No problem. I’m gonna get a large coffee to go. You want one too?”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

The restroom was empty. Obadiah went into the lone stall. He had just sat down when he heard somebody else walk in.

“Did you really think you could get away from me?”

It was Jim. Obadiah stopped breathing. Maybe if he kept quiet...

“I’m talking to you!” Jim kicked the side of the stall. “Say something!” He kicked it again.

Obadiah was struck with the words of his Biblical name-sake: What have I sinned, that thou wouldest deliver thy servant into the hand of Ahab, to slay me? But he knew exactly what his sins were. And this was judgment day. It would be fitting, he thought—for him to die half-naked in a public

restroom.

“Come out of there and face me like a man, you coward!” Jim kicked the stall even harder.

“I’m coming out,” said Obadiah. He stood and pulled up his pants. Then he heard somebody else come into the restroom.

“What’s going on in here?”

Obadiah recognized Impala’s voice.

“It’s none of your business, Lady. Get out of here.”

“You’re wrong. It is my business. That’s my boyfriend.”

“It’s okay,” said Obadiah. He opened the stall door and stepped out.

Jim reached under his jacket and produced a large hunting knife. “You ever field dress a deer, Obadiah?”

“Whoa. Put the knife away, Buddy,” said Impala, “before somebody gets hurt.”

Jim ignored her. “You start by inserting the blade at the bottom of the sternum. Of course, with a deer, I make sure the animal’s dead first. But with you, I see no need to be humane.” He began to walk

toward Obadiah, who stepped backward until he was against the wall.

Impala was ten feet behind Jim, clenching her teeth. "Put the knife down."

Jim stepped in closer to Obadiah. "Imagine how she felt...just before she died."

"I'm sorry," said Obadiah. "I'm truly sorry."

"Oh, I know you are—now. But I have no sympathy for you whatsoever, because you knew better. And everybody trusted you. She trusted you. And you used her. You killed her!"

Obadiah prayed to see Impala's steel-toed boot fly up between Jim's legs. But maybe she didn't want to save him this time. Perhaps she was having second thoughts about him—after what she was hearing.

"Get ready to meet your maker," said Jim. "Tell him you're sorry." He lurched forward, pushing Obadiah's arms upward with his left arm, exposing Obadiah's chest. He raised the knife—oblivious to the fact that Impala was running toward him from behind.

She jumped into the air and landed her boots at

the back of his knees, causing his legs to buckle. He went down backwards. Impala hopped out of the way. His head slammed on the ceramic tile floor. She stomped his forearm and grabbed the knife out of his hand.

Jim was dazed, but conscious. “Why are you helping him? He’s a murderer.”

“Forget about Obadiah,” she said.

“But you don’t understand.”

“Look—whatever he’s done, I’m sure he’ll pay for it. Just stay away from him. Or next time...I’ll kill you.”

Obadiah tiptoed his way around him. Impala wrapped the knife in paper towels and put it under her left arm.

As they came out of the restroom, Impala picked up the coffees she had left on a table. She handed one to Obadiah and they walked out of the restaurant.

She threw the knife into the woods. They got into the car and drove away.

After a few minutes of silence, Obadiah said, “Thanks for rescuing me—again. But I’m still not

going to Beaumont.”

“Well, that’s where this car is going. So…” She slowed the car down and began to pull off to side of the road.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re either going all the way or not at all.”

“Oh, come on, Impala. Surely you’re not going to just leave me out here on a dark highway in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s not the middle of nowhere. You can walk back to the McDonald’s. It’s five miles, tops.”

“I’m not going back there.”

“Afraid you might run into the deer hunter?”

“That would be preferable to running into Zeela.”

“How can you say that? She’s your mother. She loves you.”

“I don’t need her kind of love.”

“Look. It won’t kill you to just talk to her. Ten minutes—that’s all I ask. Then you can do whatever you want.”

“How about a compromise? Drop me off in Silsbee. I’ve got an old friend who lives there. Then,

after I get up my nerve, I'll go into Beaumont and pay a visit to Zeela."

"Hmm. I'll have to think about it." She pulled back onto the road. It's only two hours or so, which is going to put us there at 3:00 in the morning. So, we might as well stop at a motel and get some rest."

"You do remember that I don't have any money."

"I've got it covered."

Obadiah did need rest. But he wasn't sure he could relax enough to fall asleep. He could almost feel Jim's knife in his chest.

Impala had spotted a Motel 6 billboard a few miles back. They were getting close.

She glanced over at Obadiah. "So, where's your car?"

"Huh?"

"A guy like you has a car. Where is it?"

"It got repossessed."

"Where's your stuff? You don't even have a backpack."

"Don't rub it in."

"I guess that's why you were gonna rob that



convenience store.”

He looked away.

“How did you get in such bad shape? Weren’t you a pastor of a church?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“When I graduated from the seminary, I was contacted by the search committee of a small country church. I went there ‘in view of a call’ one Sunday. ‘In view of a call’ means—”

“—I know. It means you went there to preach and meet everybody, for them to decide if they wanted you as their pastor.”

Obadiah looked surprised.

“Zeela explained it to me.”

“Oh. Well, I ended up accepting the call. And it was wonderful...for the first year or so.”

“Isn’t it unusual for a pastor to be single?”

“It’s not the norm. But they really liked me. And everything was fine...until this young woman came to me for counseling.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Yes.”

“But married, right?”

“She and her husband were having problems. They’d only been married two years. I told her their issues were fixable.”

“But then you made a move on her.”

“No. She’s the one who made the move. One day she broke down in my office and started crying. I tried to console her, and then...she kissed me.” Obadiah’s guilt overcame him for a moment. “One thing led to another...”

“You had an affair with her.”

“It didn’t last long before I came to my senses. I told her it was over. She said she loved me and threatened to tell her husband if I broke it off.”

“But you broke it off anyway, and now her husband wants to kill you. The cowboy in the bathroom with the knife, right?”

“Yeah. But it’s much worse than that. She went home and took a handful of sleeping pills. They said it wasn’t a lethal dose though, and that she probably would have survived...if she hadn’t drowned.”

“Drowned?”

Obadiah began to cry. He could barely speak.  
“She got in the bathtub.”

“You loved her.”

“I had no right to love her,” he shouted, fighting the tears. “Not in that way.”

“But it wasn’t your fault she killed herself.”

“Yes, it was. If I hadn’t given into temptation she’d still be alive.” Tears gushed down his checks.

“How did her husband find out about the affair? Did she tell him?”

“I don’t think so. But he must have suspected that some-thing was going on. And then at the funeral, I think I gave it away. He could probably see it in my eyes. I think everybody could. I resigned the next week. Then he confronted me, and I confessed. He looked like he wanted to kill me right then. But I guess he didn’t have his knife with him.”

“No. He just wasn’t mad enough yet. He could have stabbed you with a letter opener.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” said Obadiah. “I had to get out of the parsonage right away, so I threw some clothes in my car and took off. I tried to get a job, but nothing worked out. I ran out of

money and started sleeping in my car. Then my car broke down.”

“Man, you’ve had nothing but bad luck.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it. God is punishing me.”

“You’re punishing yourself,” she said. “Here it is.” She pulled into the motel parking lot and drove up to the lobby entrance.

After Impala had checked them in, she drove around to their room and they went inside. She insisted that Obadiah shower first.

“Okay. But you know I don’t have any fresh clothes to change into. I don’t even have anything to sleep in.”

“That’s no problem. Sleep in the buff. Your clothes can air out overnight.”

“Well, I...”

“Just wear a towel.” She winked at him.

Obadiah went into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard Impala on the phone, but he didn’t much care who she was talking to. Probably Zeela. Whatever. If he had to meet with her, he would. But he would not stick around for long. That much he

knew.

When he was finished, he came out of the bathroom with one towel around his waist and another draped over his shoulders.

“Hope you saved a couple of towels for me.”

“I did.”

“Okay. Sleep well,” said Impala as she went into the bath-room.

He pulled back the covers, let his towels drop to the floor and got into bed. Obadiah was not accustomed to sleeping in the nude.

He ran his hands across the sheets, trying to determine if they were fresh. Maybe the maid skipped the sheet washing occasionally. His bare skin could well be rubbing up against the dried sweat of a previous night's lathery sex. He considered holding the sheet up to his nose for a sniff test. But some things are better left unknown. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

When she came out of the bathroom, he pretended to be asleep.

“You okay?” she said.

He opened his eyes. She was standing beside his

bed in a towel. Then she pulled it off—revealing a very naked, sexy body. Impala was much hotter than he would have imagined—if he had even thought about it. Who could think of her in that way? When a woman talks and acts tough and beats up men—you don't tend to think about how womanly she is.

“You like?”

He couldn't find words.

Impala pulled up his covers to take a look. “Nice.” She got in with him. His body was going nuts.

“Are you okay?” Suddenly she was standing beside his bed again. But this time she was wearing a baggy T-shirt and gym shorts.

“Uh—yeah.” What a dream, he thought.

“Sorry I woke you up. It's just that you were mumbling something.”

He gulped. “What did I say?”

“I couldn't quite make it out.”

“Well, I'm fine. Really. I'll try not to talk in my sleep anymore.”

“Okay. Goodnight.” She got into her bed and

clicked off the lamp.

His body was still buzzing with titillation. It would be hard to get back to sleep. Not that he minded. And like it or not, he would never see Impala the same way again.

---

“HEY, Sleepyhead, I’m gonna walk over to Denny’s. You hungry?”

Obadiah couldn’t believe it was morning. He opened one eye to confirm it, and saw the sunlight seeping in from around the curtains. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, then hop up and get dressed. I’ll get us a table.”

When she opened the door it nearly blinded him. She let it slam. He jumped. Might as well get out of bed, he thought. Otherwise, she’d come back and drag him out by the ear.

He found her tube of toothpaste on the sink and helped himself, using his finger as a toothbrush. His clothes smelled slightly better than the night before,

but they looked as though they'd been slept in.

As he walked along the front of Denny's toward the entrance, he saw Impala inside. He stepped up to the window for a closer look. Some guy was sitting at the table with her. She seemed to be having a nice conversation with him while sipping coffee.

What did Obadiah think—that he was the only man in her life? Was he actually jealous? That was crazy. He barely even knew her. Their one intimate moment had taken place in a dream.

Obadiah considered just leaving—walking back to the room. But he was hungry. And who the heck was this new guy anyway?

Then he saw the man get up from the table. Impala got up too. She followed him to the cashier and he paid the bill. Obadiah was standing at the door when the two walked out. Impala ignored him.

He started to say something, but decided to wait and see what would happen next. Impala was following the man into the parking lot.

Two police cars screeched into the parking lot. But there were no flashing lights. No sirens. What was the hurry? The Grand Slam breakfast?



The man looked back at Impala. "Sorry, Babe, I gotta go." He made a run for his car.

Impala ran after him.

Obadiah just stood there and watched—amazed and confused.

The man made it to his car and reached for the door handle.

Impala raised her right boot waist high and kicked him in the back, knocking him down.

One of the police cars pulled up behind the man's car, trapping it in place.

By the time the man got to his feet, one of the cops had a pistol aimed at his chest. "Hold it right there!"

The man froze.

Impala walked over to where Obadiah was standing. "Ready to eat?"

"Uh...yeah." He followed her back inside the restaurant while the police handcuffed the man and took him away.

"What was that?"

"Shh," she whispered. "People are already staring at us. Don't make it worse."

Once they were seated, Obadiah said, “Who was that guy?”

“A bail jumper.”

Obadiah looked at her in disbelief. “What are you—a bounty hunter? That’s it. That’s what you do for Zeela—you hunt down bail jumpers.”

“No, I’m not a bounty hunter. Not yet. Right now I’m just a secretary. But I’ve already finished my training.”

“So, you’re telling me Zeela didn’t send you out to catch that guy?”

“No. I just got lucky. In fact, she’ll fire me if she finds out I did anything more than calling the police. She could lose her license. But I just kinda fell into it. When I saw him through the window I thought he looked familiar.” She held up her phone. “I’ve got all the pictures and info in here—just in case.”

“Just in case you run into one of Zeela’s bail jumpers?”

“Yeah. Even though I didn’t really think it would ever happen. But there he was—big as Texas. And I knew it was him because I spotted his car.”

“Could have been somebody else with the same

kind of car.”

“Somebody else with a metallic blue ‘69 Chevelle SS396?”

“Okay. Probably not.”

“That thing’s got a high performance engine.”

“Good to know,” he said felicitously. “So, you called the police.”

“Yeah. And I tried to keep him inside until they got here, but he was in a hurry to get back on the road.”

“Were you actually gonna get in his car?”

“No, of course not. Although I wouldn’t mind taking that car out for a spin.”

Obadiah shook his head. “Zeela must be awfully proud of you.”

Impala stuck her tongue out at him. “Don’t you dare tell her I sat and had coffee with him, or that I knocked him down in the parking lot. If she finds out I’m toast.”

“Relax. I won’t squeal on you.” Then it hit Obadiah. He was just another one of Zeela’s bail jumpers. He had stepped off the straight and narrow, and now she was reeling him in. He was

Impala's first official catch.

Obadiah asked to borrow Impala's cell phone, and called his buddy in Silsbee. The he gave it back to her.

"So, he'll pick you up at Whataburger," she said.

"Yeah. He's moved way out in the country, and he says we'd get lost trying to find his house. Of course, he's gonna be late. Johnny is always late."

"Well, you should have told him 9:00. Then he'd be sitting there waiting for you when we pull in at 9:30."

"I don't mind waiting. Besides, I can't lie to him."

"Oh, that's right—you're a preacher. Or you used to be one."

He looked down and sighed.

"I'm sorry. That was mean."

"Besides, he just came off a graveyard shift."

"What kind of work does he do?"

"He's a welder. They're working a shutdown," said Obadiah. "It means they shut the plant down so they can do maintenance work on it."

"I know. My uncle is a pipefitter at the Exxon Mobil plant," she said. "Well, are you about ready to

go?"

"Sure."

She handed him the car keys and a twenty-dollar bill. "I've got to make a quick trip to the Ladies Room. I'll be right out."

"Okay."

Obadiah paid the bill and walked out to the car.

Impala was alone in the restroom on her cell phone. "...yeah, about 9:30...okay, bye."

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THEY DROVE into Silsbee at 9:22 a.m.. The Whataburger parking lot was nearly full.

"Well, thanks again for everything," said Obadiah. "And I'll pay you back as soon as I get a job."

"Don't worry about paying me back."

"No. I insist," he said. "But I really could use... just a couple more bucks, if you don't mind."

"For coffee?"

"Yeah. I may be waiting for quite a while."

"No problem. In fact, I'll come in and have a cup

with you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. You probably want to get home.” Yet he really wanted her to stay.

She killed the engine. “Let’s see how Whataburger coffee compares with Denny’s”

They got out and went into the restaurant.

“I’d like two large coffees,” said Impala.

Obadiah stood a few feet behind her, looking around the dining area. In the unlikely event that Johnny had already arrived, he was probably asleep in a booth.

Then he spotted Jim—the vengeful, grieving widower. He would never give up until Obadiah was dead. Why not just get it over with? Why not surrender? He had killed Jim’s wife just as surely as if he had stabbed her in the heart with a butcher knife.

Jim got up from his table, reached into his jacket, and pulled out a pistol.

This is it, thought Obadiah. I’m a dead man. Fine. I deserve it. Go ahead. Kill me.

But Jim wasn’t pointing the gun at Obadiah. He was aiming it at Impala. Why? Was it because of

what she had done to him in the McDonald's restroom? It didn't matter why. Adrenaline gushed into Obadiah's bloodstream, as he leaped on Impala.

As they hit the floor, two shots fired in rapid succession.

Obadiah's body was draped over Impala like a human shield. He was certain he'd been hit. The pain would kick at in any moment. But that wasn't the worst of it. Jim wouldn't just walk away. He'd come over and finish the job. And at close range, bullets would go right through his body, into Impala.

"It's okay. He's gone."

Obadiah couldn't believe it. He looked up. "Mom?" Her pistol was still smoking. "You shot him?"

"I got him in the shoulder. He dropped his gun and ran out. He'll be okay if he gets to a hospital soon. The police will pick him up there."

Before Obadiah could respond, Zeela had already walked away, and was on her cell phone talking to the police.

"Good job," said Impala, who was happily lying

beneath him.

“Thanks. So, you called Zeela and told her we were coming here.”

“And it’s a good thing I did.”

“Well, since she saved our lives, I guess I’ll forgive you.” He started to get up.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back down. “How would you like a job? We can be a team.”

“A bounty hunter team? No, thanks.”

“Sure. You’ll quote scripture like a preacher, while I seduce them with charm. And then—”

“—charm?”

“What? You don’t think I can be charming?”

“Well...”

She grabbed the back of his head, pulled it down to her, and gave him a long, passionate kiss.

Suddenly Obadiah flashed back to the sexy dream he’d had the night before. Oh, my God, he thought. I’m gonna do whatever this woman tells me to do.

She released the kiss and smiled at him with a sweetness that he would not have thought possible



from this butt-kicking woman.

“I’ll think about it,” he said. But she had him. And they both knew it.

“Okay, Ken and Barbie,” said Zeela, “you can get up now.”

But Obadiah didn’t want to get up. As he gazed into her eyes, he could tell she wanted another kiss. So he eased in until he made contact with her warm, moist lips.

And for the first time in a long time, Obadiah knew he had a future worth living for.

THE END

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## MEMORY BANK

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A MAN USES a new high-tech process to remove his bad memories and store them in a Memory Bank.  
1,224 words.

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“SIR, YOU FORGOT YOUR CARD.” Janet hurried to the door and looked out, but he’d already disappeared into the busy sidewalk traffic.

She walked back into the bank and took her place behind the counter.

A handsome young man came in.

Janet's smile drew him to her station. "I need to make a withdrawal."

"I'll be glad to help you with that, Sir."

"And then I'll be closing my account."

"Well, I hate to hear that," said Janet. "Have our services not lived up to your expectations? What can I do to make it right?"

"Nothing. There's nothing you can do. Just, please, process my withdrawal."

"No problem, Sir." She walked around to the end of the counter. "Please follow me."

She led him into Processing Room 3. "I'll need your member card."

He handed her the plastic card.

"So you want to withdraw everything, Mr...," She checked the name on his card before putting it into the pocket of her smock. "...Jones?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay. But you understand that this could take a couple of hours."

“Look, I never realized how important my memories were to me. Sure, there are some bad ones—some things I thought I wanted to forget. But it’s no good. Extracting them left a big hole. I can feel it. So I’ve got to have them back. I need to deal with them. Otherwise my mind will never be right. I’ll never be at peace.”

“I understand.” Janet strapped him into the chair, and attached the harness to his head, draping the cables across his shoulder.

She took out his card, swiped it through the reader, and put it back into her pocket. Then she keyed in the necessary codes to process the withdrawal. The timer came to life.

“Looks like it will take two hours and twenty-seven minutes,” said Janet.

Mr. Jones remained quiet.

She walked out of the room, turned off the lights, closed the door, and locked it.

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JANET’S COMPUTER BEEPED, and she went to

Processing Room 3. "You're all done, Mr. Jones."

"Good. Just get this thing off of me."

She removed the harness from his head and unlocked the straps from his torso. "You're good to go."

"None too soon." He jumped up from the chair and bolted for the door.

She reached into her pocket. "Mr. Jones, don't forget your card." She followed him out to the lobby.

"Keep it," he said, without looking back. "I won't be needing it anymore."

---

MR. JONES' cell phone rang again. This time he turned it off. "Why can't she just leave me alone?"

The man on the bar stool next to him said, "I know what you mean, Man. My Old Lady just keeps calling me too. She says, bring that paycheck home to me. Don't you go out wasting it on booze. But I need my booze. She just don't understand. Women just don't get it. A man works hard—"

“—yeah, right. I hear you, Man.” Mr. Jones tossed a few bills on the bar, got up and walked outside to the dark parking lot. He spotted a young man standing at his car, fumbling with his keys.

A memory flashed through his mind. He remembered how good it felt. He’d do it just like the other times. And unlike the other guys, this one had it coming.

Mr. Jones rushed up behind the man and grabbed him. “Do what I say, and you won’t get hurt.”

“Buddy, you don’t want to do this. Come on.”

Mr. Jones could feel the evil smile forming on his face. “Oh, yes I do. And I’m gonna enjoy it.”

“Wait—.”

Mr. Jones thrust the knife up into the man’s side, just below the ribcage. He yanked it out and let him fall to the ground. His heart began to race as he watched the young man struggle to stay alive. “Oh, my God. What have I done?”

---

JANET FIDGETED, across the table from the police detective.

“So you believe the reason Mr. Jones committed the murder was because you accidentally got these two cards mixed up?”

“Yes, as I told you before, Mr. Smith made a deposit, and then left before I could give him his card back. I put it in my pocket and forgot about it.”

“And then when Mr. Jones came in to withdraw all of his memories, you inserted Mr. Smith’s card into the machine instead of his.”

“Yes. And since Mr. Smith is a convicted murderer...”

“But that’s not true. Mr. Smith has never killed anyone.”

“He’s an ex-con. He told me that.”

“Yes. For embezzlement—not murder.”

“Oh,” said Janet. “Well then I guess it wasn’t my fault after all. What a relief.” She started to get up. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Sit down, Ma’am. There’s more.” He got up and began to walk around the room. “Did you know that we now have top-notch forensic computer

specialists working for the city?”

Janet squirmed.

“Apparently somebody hacked your system, allowing them to insert fake memories into Mr. Jones’ mind. They weren’t Mr. Smith’s memories. They were fabricated memories.”

“Wow—that’s amazing. But why would anyone want to do that?”

“That’s what we wondered,” said the detective. “The victim was new in town. Only been living here a few weeks. But he told a co-worker that a woman was stalking him. He met her online and went out with her once. But when he didn’t call her back, she went all Fatal Attraction on him.”

“So you think this woman somehow hacked into our system so she could program one of our customers to kill the man? That’s pretty farfetched.”

The detective just stared at her.

Janet cleared her throat. “So how are you going to catch this mystery woman? Only the victim knew who she was, right?”

“True.”

“Too bad he’s dead.”



“Did I say he was dead?” He looked over her head at the door behind her.

Janet gulped and slowly turned around.

“That was a lie for the press.”

An officer was looking through the window in the door.

The detective motioned to him.

The door opened, and a handsome young man walked in. “Hello, Janet.”

She lunged at him like a cheetah, screaming and clawing.

The officer stopped her cold with an iron fist to the jaw.

She lay on the floor dazed, looking up at the young man.

“You just couldn’t leave me alone, could you, Janet?”

She grimaced.

“Mr. Jones is okay too, by the way. I’m not pressing charges against him. It wasn’t his fault.”

“And I’ve decided to go easy on you too—even though you nearly had me killed. The state has this new program for criminals. It’s called Total Memory

Erasure. Heard of it?"

"Please, no."

"It will wipe out your criminal memories and thoughts. Perhaps it will cure you. Unfortunately, the process has not been fully perfected. You'll have to wear diapers at first, and learn to eat with a spoon."

"God, no. Don't do this to me."

"All I care about is that you won't remember me. Good luck, Janet."

She screamed as he walked out of the room, and continued to scream until her throat was raw. "No! No! No! No! No! No!"

---

JANET LAY in her adult-size crib, wetting herself, remembering nothing.

THE END

PRINCE OF PUMPKINSHIRE

*Copyright © 2008 Robert Burton Robinson*

CHIP'S LIFE is changed forever after an encounter with bullies in the woods on Halloween night. 1,898 words.

---

TODAY I TURNED 13. My birthday party was cool. I got a lot of stuff I wanted—and one thing I *didn't* want: a personal journal.

Journals are for girls. But my mother gave me this thing and she said I have to at least give it a try. And that it's the least I can do after she spent money on it.

I wish she had bought me another video game instead. (Are you reading this, Mom? Why are you snooping into my stuff?)

Okay. Might as well get it over with.

Tomorrow is Halloween—and it's going to be the best one ever. Although, it's going to be hard to top last year. It was a game changer. With a little help from my big brother, Dale, I became a man. (Are you freaking out yet, Mom? That's what you get for snooping. Better stop reading now.)

By the way, my name is Chip. Get it? I'm Chip. My older brother is Dale. Very funny, huh? Seems like my parents didn't develop a sense of humor until I was born. Otherwise they would have named their *first* son Chip and their *second* son Dale. Maybe when I popped out they just started laughing for the first time in their lives.

Anyway, back to my story about how I became a man.

It was Halloween night. My best friend Jimmy and I were dressed up like Peanut M&Ms. Why did we choose little kid costumes? (1) We're both short for our age. (2) Little kids get more candy—especially if they're dressed up really cute.

We never even have to leave my neighborhood. By the time we get back to my house our bags are overflowing. We pig-out until we barf. Then we pig-out some more.

My brother, Dale, is sixteen, but he's not much taller than me. We invited him to go with us.

"No thanks, guys," he said. "I'm a solo act. You get more candy that way. If you go to the door in a crowd, each kid gets just one thing. But when you're standing there all alone—like you have no friends, they usually feel sorry for you and drop a big handful of stuff in your bag."

Jimmy and I admire Dale's mastery of the art of trick-or-treatery. And we could see his point. But we liked going together.

We always start at the back of the neighborhood and work our way up to my house—because the bags get pretty heavy toward the end. But last year,

things didn't go so well. When we got back to my house our bags were only half full.

So, we decided to go over to Jimmy's neighborhood, Forest Ridge. It's a long walk by road, so we always take the shortcut through the woods.

There was no moon that night, so the woods were completely black. But we had our flashlights. Besides, as many times as we've walked that trail, we probably could have done it with our eyes closed.

We were about halfway through the woods when three guys jumped out from the darkness, blocking the trail. They were over six feet tall, dressed like actors from a Robin Hood movie.

Jimmy and I were about to walk around them, when one of them said, "Halt, ye peasants!"

Cool, I thought. These guys are staying in character—even when they're not begging for candy. But they couldn't be getting much anyway. They were way too old for trick-or-treating.

Then the two outer guys drew their swords. I knew they had to be plastic, but they looked very

real.

“I am the Prince of Pumpkinshire,” said the middle one, “and this is my sheriff,” nodding to the one on his right.

Yes, I could see him as a prince. Very believable costume.

“You will bow down and worship the prince!” said the sheriff.

Jimmy and I looked at each other. It was getting a little weird.

“You will obey...or you shall surely die!”

The sheriff and the deputy stepped toward us, raising their swords.

There was no way we could outrun those big guys. We dropped to our knees.

“There is a tax to be paid to the prince.”

A *tax*? What the heck?

“Ninety-five percent of your wages.”

Ha! Got you there, Buddy. I don't make any wages. I'm only 12. “But...”

The sheriff and his deputy snatched our bags of candy. The bags were only half-full, but we had worked hard for that candy.

“Go, and sin no more,” said the prince.

Wait, I thought, isn't that from the *Bible*? These guys are fake. What was I thinking—of course they were fake. They were just bullies who steal candy from young little kids. But Jimmy and I aren't little. Well, we're *little*—but we're not young.

All three of them began to laugh as they turned to walk away. Not a modern laugh—it was a *Medieval* laugh. Picture a fat guy, dressed in fancy, heavy clothes, sitting at a table eating a huge turkey leg, drinking wine out of a big metal goblet. Can you hear the laugh?

“Hey, you said ninety-five percent,” I yelled.

The sheriff threw a couple of Snickers over his shoulder, and laughed even harder.

I said we should go after them. Jimmy agreed. Then he got sick and went home.

What a bust. It was supposed to be the greatest night of the year. The candy was free. And your parents let you eat all you wanted—even if it made you sick. But now it was ruined.

As I walked home with my head held low, I unwrapped the Snicker bar and started to eat it. But



it only reminded me of how those bullies had laughed at us. I took it out of my mouth and threw it as hard as I could. Then I thought, what if a dog eats it? The chocolate might kill him. So what? I was mad. I should have stood up to those bullies.

When I got back home I went to Dale's room and knocked on the door.

"Come in, Butthead."

Dale was sprawled out across his bed watching TV. He tossed a handful of Skittles at his open mouth. A few of them fell on the floor. He didn't seem to notice or care. Why should he? His trick or treat bag was filled to the top.

"Where did you get all that?"

"Right here in the neighborhood," he mumbled and chewed.

"We only got half a bag."

"So did I—the first time around."

"The *first* time around?"

"Yeah. Then I came back and changed into my other costume."

"Where did you get another costume?"

"I saved the one from last year."

I told him what had happened to me and Jimmy. He got mad. “Chip! You’ve got to learn to stand up to bullies.”

---

ON MY WAY into the woods, I wondered how Jimmy was doing. Maybe his mom felt sorry for him and gave him all the leftover trick-or-treat candy in the house. Or maybe he had cried himself to sleep. I hoped not. Come on, Jimbo, we’re twelve—not five.

I was halfway through the woods when I heard, “Halt!”

I shined my flashlight up at the three towering Medievals.

“I am the Prince of Pumpkinshire, and this is *my* forest.”

The sheriff and his deputy drew their swords. “You will bow down and worship the prince!” said the sheriff.

Here we go again. I got down on my knees.

“You must pay taxes to the kingdom. You will give up your belongings...or your head!” They

raised their swords.

“Please, Sire, I pray thee. Accept my humble offering.” I placed my bag on the ground in front of me.

“Let us see if your offering be worthy of the prince,” said the sheriff, nodding for the deputy to pick up the bag.

The deputy returned his sword to its scabbard, stepped forward and retrieved my bag. He moved back and seemed to be trying to evaluate it based on weight. Then he got a whiff. “This candy stinks! It smells like—”

“—dog poop?” I said, rising to my feet. “Not just *any* dog poop. That’s fresh, Grade-A stuff.”

The sheriff spat on the ground and said, “You have insulted the prince!”

“Off with his head,” said the prince.

The deputy tossed the bag into the woods. He and the prince drew their swords. All three were poised to attack.

“Wait,” I said. “Am I not entitled to last words?”

The prince seemed amused. “Yes. Say your final words, peasant.”

“Thank you, Sire. These are my final words: the place you *are* is the place you’re *in*.”

“What does *that* mean?” For the first time, the prince sounded like a high school senior instead of a Medieval prince.

“I believe the meaning is quite clear, Your Majesty,” I said. “The place you *are* is the place you’re *in*. *You’re in*—get it? *Urine*.”

“What?” said the sheriff.

I reached for the Super Soaker water gun that was strapped to my back. “You can’t imagine how much Coke I had to drink to get this much pee, Your Majesty.”

Before they could decide whether to attack or retreat, I blasted all three of them in the face with my warm, liquid ammo.

They screamed like little girls, dropping their plastic swords and fleeing into the darkness. I think one of them ran into a tree.

---

THE NEXT MORNING I was sitting on the back seat of

the school bus when Kyle got on. The six-foot-five quarterback bypassed five or six empty seats on his way to my seat.

What was Kyle doing on the bus? He was a senior. His dad must have taken his driver's license away again.

He plopped down next to me, elbowing my ribs in the process. "So, how's it hanging, Chippy?" He reached for my left nipple.

I blocked his hand. No nipple twisting today, I assured myself.

He was about to go for the other one, when I said, "You were great in the movie."

"What movie?"

"The one my brother shot last night. I can't wait to upload it to the web."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do, Your Majesty."

He looked confused, then angry. "How did you know it was me?"

"I didn't know for sure—until now."

Clearly, he wanted to rip my head off.

I went on. "The mighty Prince of Pumpkinshire

—slain in battle.”

“Shut up!” He checked to see if anybody was looking or listening. Then he whispered, “I’ll kill you.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll never touch me again—unless you want to see your little movie on YouTube. And the next time I run into you and your friends at the mall I’ll command you to bark like a dog. And you *will*.”

Kyle was speechless.

“Now get out of my sight. You make me sick.” I said it loud enough for everybody to hear.

He got up and moved to a seat near the front of the bus.

Kyle’s been avoiding me ever since that day.

And that is how I, with the help of my brother, dethroned the evil Prince of Pumpkinshire...and became a man.

(Did my story scare you, Mom? Good. Then I think we can agree that I don’t need to write in this stupid thing anymore. Journals are for girls, Mom.)

THE END

SMILEY FROWNER

*Copyright © 2008 Robert Burton Robinson*

FIVE-YEAR-OLD JESSICA DOESN'T GO ANYWHERE without Smiley—the handmade doll that protects her from the evils of the world. 1,908 words.

---

AMBER HAD BEEN DRIVING to Wal-Mart with her five-year-old daughter, Jessica, when she spotted the garage sale sign.



“Why are there so many dolls?” said Amber.

The woman sighed. “Because it’s the only thing of value my sister owned. She didn’t believe in savings accounts or investments...or burial insurance.”

Then it clicked. Amber remembered the horrific story from a recent newspaper article. The cops said it was a murder-suicide of a little girl and her foster parents. The young child had been strangled in her high chair. Then the man stabbed his wife in the chest and slit his own throat. These dolls had belonged to that poor woman. Perhaps a few of them had been the little girl’s.

Amber began to get the creeps and wished she hadn’t stopped. Most of the dolls were too expensive anyway. She walked down to where Jessica was standing, in front of a box of dolls priced at five dollars. Most were missing arms or legs.

“Look what I found, Mommy,” said Jessica, clutching an old hand-sewn doll. The smiley face and pink dress had been drawn onto the off-white material with some type of markers.

“Oh, Honey, it’s dirty.”

“I don’t care, Mommy. I want her.”

Amber took the doll and examined it carefully. She pictured the child in the high chair holding the doll. She saw the girl’s little arms go limp as the life went out of her.

“I don’t know, Jessie.”

“Please, Mommy. Please.”

At least there was no blood on the doll. Hopefully it had not been in the room. She gave it back to Jessica. “Let’s go talk to the lady about it.”

They walked back down to the woman.

“So, you’re asking five dollars for this one?” said Amber.

Jessica held up the doll.

When the woman saw it, she immediately looked away. “That doll should not have been in the five-dollar box.”

Jessica’s hopeful smile faded. She turned the doll around to look at its face. The doll’s smile was gone too. It seemed just as sad as Jessica.

“So, how much do you want for it?”

“Nothing. It’s free,” said the woman, still looking away. “Just get it out of here.”

The doll's frown turned into a smile, and Jessica hugged her new best friend.

Once they were back in the car, Jessica said, "Mommy, I love Smiley." She hugged the doll with all her might.

"That's a good name for him."

"Her," Jessica corrected. "Her name is Smiley Frowner."

Frowner? Okay—kinda weird, thought Amber. Hopefully by the end of the week Miss Smiley would find her rightful place at the bottom of Jessica's toy box.

---

TWENTY-SEVEN YEAR-OLD BRANDY was on her way out of Wal-Mart when she passed a woman about her age with a young girl. She looked familiar. Then it hit her: it was the woman from the newspaper—the one who married that rich old fart.

That's what I need, she thought—a sugar daddy. Ryan was never going to amount to anything. She should have dumped him in high school.

---

“MOMMY, can I please get a new coloring book?”

“Jessie, I just bought you one last week.”

“I know, Mommy, but I want a different one.”

Jessica had already discovered the persuasive powers of a sad face.

“Oh, alright.” Amber squatted in front of her daughter. “You can stay here and pick out a coloring book while I go right over there and look at the purses.”

Jessica grinned. “Okay, Mommy.”

“But you have to promise to stay right here until I get back.”

“I will, Mommy. I will.”

“Okay then.” Amber gave her a quick peck on the lips. “I’ll be back in just a few minutes.”

Jessica and Smiley had been looking through the large collection of coloring books for several minutes when Brandy rushed up to her.

“Little girl?”

“My name is Jessica.”

“Good. You’re the one I’m looking for. Your

mommy slipped and fell down. They're taking her to the hospital."

"No, *my* mommy's right over there," she said, pointing to the purses. But she didn't see her mother.

"No. She's on her way to the hospital. And she asked me to take you there." Brandy held out her hand. "Let's go."

Jessica began to cry. "I want my Mommy."

"I know, Sweetie. I'm gonna take you to her."

---

"I THOUGHT we were going to the hospital," said Jessica.

"Your mommy's gonna come here to my house and pick you up." Brandy killed the engine. "Hey, how about a big glass of milk and some chocolate chip cookies?"

Jessica frowned.

"Don't be sad. Your mommy will be here soon."

Brandy took Jessica into the house.

Her boyfriend, Ryan, was lying on the couch

watching TV. "Who's this?"

"This is Jessica. Her mother had an accident at Wal-Mart and had to be rushed to the hospital. I told her I would watch Jessica for her."

"Come over here and sit at the table, Sweetie, and I'll get your milk and cookies."

While Jessica was eating her cookies, Brandy walked over to Ryan.

He grabbed the TV remote, lowered the volume, and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"I'm about to make us rich."

Ryan glanced over at Jessica and then looked back at Brandy. "What have you done?"

"Don't you recognize her?"

He took another look. "No."

"You know the woman who married that rich dude? What's his name? The *old* guy. It was in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago."

"That's the daughter?"

Brandy smiled. "Yeah. And they're gonna have to pay a lot of money to get her back."

"You idiot! She's seen our faces."

"No problem, Baby. We'll move to Mexico."

Cancun.”

“You’re crazy. Absolutely nuts.”

“Yeah, I’m crazy. And we’re gonna be crazy rich.”

His scowl turned into a greedy grin. “We’ll never have to work again.”

“We’ll just lay out on the beach all day.”

A special news bulletin interrupted the TV show.

“There she is—that’s the mother.”

“Are you sure?”

“Turn it up.”

As they listened to the news report, the reality of the situation began to sink in. Jessica’s parents were not rich at all. Brandy had kidnapped the child of some middle-class couple.

“Great,” said Ryan. “Now what are we gonna do? We’re not going to Cancun. We’re going to prison.”

“No, we’re not. I’ll tell the police I was just trying to help the little girl. I’ll say she was wondering down the sidewalk and I picked her up.”

“What about the lies you told the girl? You said her mother had an accident and went to the hospital.

She's gonna tell the police."

"Go outside and have a smoke," said Brandy.  
"I'll take care of this."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go!"

Ryan grabbed his cigarettes and lighter and walked out to the front yard.

Brandy went into the kitchen. "How are those cookies?"

"Good," said Jessica.

Brandy walked over to the sink and turned on the cold water. She flipped a switch and the garbage disposal came to life. Then she opened a drawer and selected a very large, very sharp knife.

She turned around and said, "I'm afraid your mommy's not coming."

"Why?"

Brandy walked toward her with the knife.

Jessica dropped her cookie on the table, picked up Smiley, and looked into the doll's face. "I'm scared, Smiley."

Smiley frowned.

Jessica turned Smiley around to face Brandy,



who was now standing over them, holding the knife in the air.

Brandy looked at Smiley's face. It unnerved her to see that the painted-on smile had somehow changed to a frown. But it wouldn't stop her from chopping Jessica into pieces and stuffing the little body parts down the garbage disposal.

Suddenly Brandy felt her body being sucked back toward the sink. Her spine hit the edge of the counter with such force that she dropped the knife. She couldn't bend over to pick it up. She couldn't move. Her body would not obey her brain.

Smiley's head suddenly ballooned into something monstrous. The expression on its face was more frightening than anything Brandy had ever seen. Her heart pounded ferociously.

The knife flew into the air and hung suspended directly in front of her.

"Jessica? What are you doing? Please don't hurt me!"

The knife juttet toward her and then back—the movement too swift for her eyes to follow.

Had she been cut? She didn't think so—until she

saw something dripping from the blade.

She felt a twinge in her left shoulder. Then excruciating pain. Blood began to gush down her left arm. Her shoulder popped out of its socket. Flesh ripped. Her arm fell to the floor like a fresh cut of beef.

She screamed. "What are you doing to me?"

The knife flashed again. Her right arm tore off and hit the floor. Smiley's head grew even larger, until it filled the room. His horrifying face was two inches from Brandy's.

She trembled uncontrollably. "No. Please."

She had forgotten all about the garbage disposal until she heard the grinding behind her.

She turned around to see one of her detached arms being gobbled up. Her fingers seemed to wave goodbye as they disappeared into the drain. She heard her grandmother's wedding ring clanging around for a moment.

Her other arm went down fast, as the drain seemed to open its mouth wider. She could see the shiny, buzzing teeth.

Brandy's legs suddenly yanked in opposite

directions, dropping her torso the floor. Her legs shot up to her sides until both feet kicked her in the head. Then they mercifully dropped back down—only to be chopped off.

Once the disposal had chewed and swallowed the two legs, she felt herself begin to float. Smiley manipulating her body like a puppet master.

The drain grew even larger. What was left of her began to rise above the sink. The rate and volume of blood pumping out of her body began to surpass that of the water flowing from the faucet.

She went into the sharp metal teeth head first. Once her head was chewed off at the neck, the drain expanded further, and her torso was sucked down whole.

Finally, the disposal turned off and the water stopped running.

Smiley was back to normal.

Jessica turned her around and hugged her. Jessica had not heard or seen anything.

---

“ARE YOU OKAY, Honey? Maybe you should sleep with Mommy and Daddy tonight,” said Amber.

Surely Jessica would have nightmares. According to the police, the boyfriend had cut up his girlfriend’s body and put it down the garbage disposal. Then he had stuffed ten cigarettes down his throat and choked to death. Very strange.

Jessica said she hadn’t seen anything. But what if she was just blocking it out of her mind? What would happen when it all started to come back to her?

“Really, Jessie. I think you should sleep with us.”

“Smiley and I want to sleep in our own room. It’s her first night.”

“Well, okay. I guess we can try it. But if you and Smiley get scared, just come and jump in bed with us.”

“Okay, Mommy. But we won’t get scared.”

She kissed Jessica.

“Kiss Smiley too.”

“Okay.” She kissed the doll. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mommy.”

Amber turned off the light and walked out,

closing the door behind her.

Jessica could see Smiley in the dim rays of her nightlight.

“I love you, Smiley Frowner.”

The painted-on smile broadened.

Jessica held Smiley in her arms as she drifted into a peaceful night's sleep.

THE END

## ROYAL HIGHNESS OF INTELLECTITUDE

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A BRILLIANT COUPLE'S love of competition leads to tragedy. 1,370 words.

---

GWEN STOOD IN HER LAB, admiring the reflection of her sleek, naked body. At 30, she was every bit as stunning as the day she met her husband, Artie, at an engineering conference five years earlier. It was

love at first sight. Or perhaps, love at their first discussion of artificial intelligence.

Each of them held a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering. Artie was an MIT man. Gwen, a Stanford girl. Which one could outsmart the other? It was a daily game. And was just for fun at first. Then it became an obsession.

They had separate research labs, located at opposite ends of their sprawling home. Pass codes and retinal scanners provided tight security over each lab. Neither had stepped inside the other's lab in four years.

Each of them held highly secretive government positions. Their research was critical to national security. Yet, the prospect of saving the free world was not nearly as intriguing as winning their little daily game of war against each other.

They liked to think of it in terms of a Medieval Empire. At the end of each day, the victor would be crowned: either King Arthur or Queen Guinevere. For the next 24 hours, you were either the Royal Highness of Intellectitude, or you were the Perfunctory Pauper of Pitydom. There was no

middle ground.

Gwen got dressed and walked out to the kitchen.

Artie was standing at the stove. "Permission to speak, Your Majesty?"

Gwen would enjoy her queenly perks throughout the day, until the rightful owner of the crown was reassessed at 10:00 p.m. "Silence!" She paused for effect. "Now you may speak, Serf."

"I am preparing a most royal omelet for you, Majesty."

"Today...I shall have Eggs Benedict."

"But omelets are your favorite, My Queen."

She grinned. "Not today. Eggs Benedict."

"Then Eggs Benedict you shall have, Majesty."

Gwen sat down at the table. "How's your pet project coming along?"

"The virus that will invade your computer system and hypnotize you?"

"Yes. The one that will supposedly allow you to control my mind via post-hypnotic suggestion."

He smiled. "It's coming along quite well. Just a few more tweaks to the algorithm, and—"

"—you'll make me bark like a dog?"



“Not quite, Your Majesty. I will make you bark like a cat.”

She sneered. “Apparently they didn’t teach you this at MIT, but cats don’t bark.”

“But you will, My Feline.”

“Watch your mouth, Peasant! You must address me with proper respect at all times.”

---

TWO DAYS LATER, Artie completed the final testing of his hypnotic virus application. The toughest part was penetrating Gwen’s ironclad firewall.

Now it was time for the test. He texted Gwen.

Your Majesty, your humble servant requests a sexual rendezvous at the cabin. I suggest we go up separately, and meet there as strangers.

Gwen hated their cabin, and had refused sex for months. If she went along with this, it would prove that his application, and its post-hypnotic suggestion had succeeded.

Gwen texted him back, consenting. She would go ahead, and he would finish up his work and join her

within the hour. This would be the ultimate conquest. Perhaps he would be King for a month.

Artie gave Gwen a mere fifteen minutes of lead time. What excited him more? The success of his hypnotic virus or the prospect of a wild, role-playing sex game.

On his way up the mountain he encountered a road block. He pulled over and walked up to one of the cops. "What's going on, Officer?"

"Somebody went over the side. Drove right through the railing."

"What kind of car was it? Did anybody see it happen?"

"Yeah. We've got one witness over there. Said it was a pink Rolls Royce. A beautiful young blonde. No passengers."

Artie's heart sunk.

The cop said, "You okay, Mister?"

"It was my wife."

"I'm very sorry, Sir."

His software had worked flawlessly, infecting Gwen's computer system and hypnotizing her to follow his post-hypnotic suggestion. But something

had gone terribly wrong. Had the hypnosis affected her driving skills? Had it affected her powers of concentration? Tears welled up in his eyes.

“Sir?”

How had he let it come to this? It was just a game. Life would never be the same without Gwen. If he could just take it back, he could be happy to let her reign as his queen for the rest of his life.

Artie spoke under his breath, more to himself than to the cop. “Even though I won the final game, my dear Guinevere, you were, and will always be the Royal Highness of Intellectitude. I love you... Your Majesty.”

The officer saw Artie’s face go blank. “Sir, would you mind answering a few questions? Sir?”

Artie walked away from the cop.

“Uh, Sir, I need you to come back over here, please.”

Artie began to walk faster—toward the broken railing.

“Come back. It’s not safe over there. Stop!”

But Artie broke into a full run. Past the other cop and the witness. Through the broken railing. Over

the cliff.

Artie yelled, "Majesty," as he flew over the edge and fell to his death.

Within moments, a beautiful blonde drove up in a sports car, parked it behind Artie's car, and got out.

"Did someone have an accident?" she said.

"Yeah. A woman drove her car over the side. Then her husband jumped off the cliff."

The witness stared at the blonde, as though he might have recognized her from somewhere.

"Oh, no," said the blonde.

"Yeah," said the witness, "but the weirdest part was what he yelled when he jumped off the cliff."

"What was it? What did he yell?"

"Majesty."

The blonde's eyes glazed over.

The cop and the witness looked at each other, puzzled at her reaction.

Suddenly, she dashed toward the broken railing.

"Stop her!" yelled the cop.

The other officer tried to grab her arm as she raced by, but she was just too fast.

She leaped off the edge, screaming “Majesty!”

---

WEEKS LATER, a government computer expert managed to decrypt Artie’s hypnotic virus code and analyze it. It was a complex, powerful program that would remain top-secret. There would be no public comment regarding the code, or its connection to the deaths of two valuable scientists.

Gwen had immediately been aware that Artie’s virus had infected her computer system. The only way she could hope to defeat him was to bounce the virus back to his computer without him realizing it. And she had been successful.

So, when she had accepted Artie’s suggestion of driving up to the cabin for a sexual rendezvous, it had not been because of a hypnotic suggestion. It had been to beat him at his own game.

He was not aware that the android she had been working on for years had finally been perfected. It looked exactly like Gwen. And it was fully functional. How long would it take for Artie to

realize he was playing sex games with an android? She would laugh her butt off watching him through a cabin window. And she would be queen for months.

Gwen knew she was pushing the envelope of safety when she allowed the android to drive her Rolls Royce up to the cabin. Something had caused it to malfunction and drive the car off the side of the mountain. Perhaps there had still been a problem with the calibration of the eyes.

Artie reached the roadblock and thought Gwen had driven off the cliff and was dead. He didn't know about her android. And he didn't realize he had been hypnotized by his own virus program. When he inadvertently said the post-hypnotic keyword, he followed his own post-hypnotic suggestion.

Gwen had avoided the hypnosis at first, and so she was not affected by Artie's suggestion of the sexual rendezvous at the cabin. But right after that, his virus got her. His post-hypnotic suggestion had been planted in her mind as well.

And so, both geniuses were killed by the same

post-hypnotic suggestion.

The Suggestion: Do whatever your spouse suggests. Go along with whatever your spouse wants. Blindly follow their lead without question.

The Keyword: Majesty.

THE END

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## MARGIN OF ERROR

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AN AMBITIOUS CAMPAIGN manager claims she can deliver a victory every time—once she gets the poll numbers within the Margin of Error. But she learns too late that not everything in life works like an election. And that statistics can only be carried so far...before you become one. 2,863 words.

---



“HAVE A SEAT, LUCINDA.”

“Thank you, Sir—I mean *Mayor*.”

The mayor smiled. “I do like the sound of that. But I couldn’t have done it without you.”

And I’m glad you’re smart enough to realize it, thought Lucinda. “Oh, I don’t know about *that*, Mayor.”

“No, no. Don’t be modest. I hired you to pull a rabbit out of your hat, and you did it. It was impressive. When you came in, I was down twenty points, and—”

“—twenty-three.”

“And somehow you turned public opinion around. Nobody thought I could beat Elderman—until my poll numbers started getting better every week.”

“Once we tied him, I knew he was goner.”

“You kept saying that. But we never *did* tie him. He was still four points ahead in the last poll.”

“Right. We were within the *margin of error*.”

“Oh, you and your margin of error. I’ve heard that every day for the last month. Margin of error *this*, margin of error *that*.”

“Hey—you won, didn’t you?”

The mayor grinned. “I sure did. And now you’re gonna be my chief of staff. Right?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“No, you’re not. You want the job.”

“It depends.” Lucinda smiled seductively. “Do you have any dinner plans?”

“Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Sorry.” He checked his watch. “Well, thanks again, Lucinda. Wonderful job. Now, why don’t you walk down the hall to your new office and get to work.”

She frowned at him.

“It’s the biggest office in the building.”

“Besides this one.”

“Well, yes, of course.”

Lucinda stood up.

The mayor got up and walked around to the front of his desk. “Oh, and our first order of business: the homeless.”

“I know. *Job One: Clean Up the Streets.*”

He smiled. “It was a great slogan.”

“Thank you.”

“Your idea of doing our own private polling was

*genius*. I knew people were upset about all the homeless guys hanging around restaurants, begging for handouts. But I had no idea it was the number one concern.”

“Yeah. Elderman probably thought we were nuts to go with that campaign slogan.”

“And by the time he realized we were on to something, it was too late.” He laughed. “It was brilliant.”

If you really want to show your appreciation, thought Lucinda, how about a hot, wet kiss?

“And now it’s *your* Job One, Lucinda. Go clean up the streets.” He walked her to the door.

“I’m going to need some money.”

“No problem.”

“Don’t you want to know how—”

“—I don’t *care* how you do it or how much it costs. Just get it done.”

---

THE MAYOR HAD AVOIDED Lucinda for two weeks. He was always too busy to meet with her. She guessed

it was because of her romantic interest in him.

“Close the door and have a seat, Lucinda. I want to talk to you about these poll numbers,” said the mayor.

Lucinda smiled. “You’re looking great, Mayor. The people are very happy with you.”

“Except when it comes to the homeless.”

“What do you mean? You got a ninety-six percent approval rating on that. And our margin of error was four percent. So, you were perfect.”

“No, Lucinda. I don’t want to hear anything about a margin of error. I want to see one-hundred percent approval on this thing.”

“But, Mayor—”

“—look. You and I both know there are still bums out there on the streets. And all it takes is one or two business owners calling some reporter down at the TV station and they’ll do a story on the total failure of my cleanup efforts. I can’t have that, Lucinda. Fix it. Now!”

“Yes, Mayor.” She stood up. “I’m on it.”

She walked down the hall to her office, shut the door, and flipped open her cell phone.

“It’s been two weeks, Frank. When are you going to be finished? The Mayor’s losing patience.”

“I’m done.”

“I don’t *think* so. I saw two men lying on the sidewalk outside Pappy’s Pancake House this morning. You’re not done.”

“Look, almost all of the people took the cash and got on a bus. And believe me, I put the fear of God in them. They won’t come back.”

“I believe you. But what about the others?”

“I tried everything. But they’ve got to be able to stand up and walk onto the bus. You can’t *carry* them on. They’re so messed up—some of them don’t even know who they are.”

“You can’t *scare* them into going?”

“I told one guy if he didn’t get up and come with me I was gonna slit his throat. I even pulled out a knife and held it to his neck. He didn’t care. Maybe he *wanted* me to do it—just to put him out of his misery.”

“Well, what am I gonna do?”

“That’s your problem. I want my cash. Meet me in thirty minutes.”

“But...”

She took the phone away from her ear and looked at it. He had already hung up.

---

“AREN’T you going to count it?” said Lucinda.

“I trust you,” said Frank, as he put the thick envelope into his coat pocket. “This guy might be able to help you.” He handed her a slip of paper with phone number on it.

“Who—”

“—don’t ask,” he said. “And you didn’t get that from me. Good luck.” He got up from the booth and walked out of the restaurant.

Lucinda looked around. She checked her wig for the tenth time, making sure it was still securely attached. Nobody would recognize her anyway. The townspeople didn’t even know her—except for the mayor and his staff.

She dropped a five-dollar bill on the table for the coffee, and walked out to her car. The phone number on the slip of paper was from another area

code.

It would be crazy to hire some anonymous man over the phone. But she was desperate to complete her task. She couldn't give up now. Lucinda would finish the job, and then get what she wanted most: a date with the mayor.

The services she required were in the gray area, legally speaking. *Dark* gray. No matter, she thought. Whatever it takes.

She punched in the numbers and waited.

"Yeah?" It was a deep, gruff voice.

"Uh...somebody gave me your number, and—"

"—*who* gave you my number?" He sounded even scarier than Frank.

"I can't say. But I may have a job for you."

"What does it pay?"

"Five thousand."

"Call somebody else."

"No, wait. I can go as high as ten."

"What's the job?"

"Getting the homeless people off our streets. We managed to get most of them to leave town by giving them money. But the others—they're just too

messed up in the head. You can't reason with them."

"How many people are we talking about?"

"Probably less than a dozen."

"When do you need it done?"

"As soon as possible."

"Tomorrow night. And don't be stupid enough to try to rip me off."

"I wouldn't do that. But I don't even know your name."

"I don't yours either. But I have your phone number. I'll look up the rest."

Suddenly Lucinda felt dangerously exposed.

"And don't bother trying to trace *my* phone. It's a throwaway."

If it was a throwaway, how did Frank have the number? "I won't."

The line went dead.

---

"HELLO?"

"Ten is not enough."

Lucinda jumped up from her desk, hurried to the



door and closed it. "That's was the deal."

"You said there were less than a dozen. The number's more like sixteen. I've taken care of eleven. So, I'm done. And I want my money."

"No, that's not good enough. They *all* have to go. It doesn't do me any good unless every one of them is off the street."

"Then you'll pay me an extra ten."

"What? No. I'll pay an extra five. That's all."

"Fine. Then you can get somebody else. But I want my money today."

She couldn't pay him another ten-thousand dollars. But where would she find somebody else to take care of the last few bums? The mayor was giving a speech on Thursday night. He wanted to be able to claim success for cleaning up the streets. She had to get it done.

"Okay. I'll pay the extra ten. But you've got to finish it tonight."

"Done."

---

LUCINDA ROLLED over and stared at the glowing numbers on her alarm clock. It was after three. She wondered if he had finished the job.

Since she couldn't sleep anyway, she decided to go for a drive. She passed Pappy's. Yes! No more homeless. Then she drove by a few of the other popular homeless hangouts. They were all gone. She couldn't believe it. How had he done it? What difference did it make? They were all gone.

As she drove toward her apartment, Lucinda felt a great sense of satisfaction. Now that the pressure was off, she had a craving for a good cup of coffee and a piece of pie. And she knew just where to get it.

She took a shortcut through the high school parking lot on her way to Bill's 24-Hour Coffee Shop. It hadn't taken long to discover that Bill had the best Apple pie in town.

But as she drove past the high school, she noticed some-thing odd. In the moonlight, above the building there was a cloud of smoke. Perhaps it was just an optical illusion. Yes, she thought, it was probably a cloud way off in the sky.

Lucinda stopped the car and rolled down her

window. It was no cloud. She could smell the smoke.

She killed the engine and got out of the car. If some kids were up to no good, she didn't want to alert them to her presence until she could see who they were and what they were doing.

She ran around to the back of the building to take a look. The smoke was coming from the school's incinerator. The gate was open. An old commercial van was parked in front of the incinerator. The engine was running, but the headlights were off.

A man walked around from the back of the van with something across his shoulder. He carried it to the incinerator and dumped it into the open hatch.

Then it hit her. Surely this is not the man I hired, she thought. And surely the thing he just threw into the incinerator was not a...

The man walked to the back of the van, closed the doors, and then went back to the incinerator to close the hatch. He got into the van and drove away with his headlights still off.

Once he was gone, Lucinda hurried over to the incinerator. She found a crumpled paper bag on the

ground to use as an oven mitt. When she opened the incinerator hatch, she gasped and jumped back from the searing heat. Then she eased in—just close enough to see down inside.

A set of eyes in a burning face looked back at her. The man must have been so full of drugs or alcohol that he was just waking up to the excruciating pain of the fire engulfing his body. He looked as if he was trying to scream. Perhaps his vocal chords had already burned away. His eyeballs suddenly burst into flames.

Lucinda turned and vomited repeatedly.

When the queasiness began to subside she turned around to close the hatch. Something shiny on the ground caught her eye. She picked it up and studied it in the light of the raging fire. It was a silver necklace with a seven-sided silver charm that had two letters in the center: AA. Undoubtedly, it had belonged to one of the drunks who were now being cremated. They should have stayed on the program, she thought, as she put the necklace into her pocket.

She closed the hatch and walked back around the

building, got into her car and drove away, praying nobody had seen her.

Her craving for pie was gone.

---

“I DIDN’T SEE any bums on the streets this morning.”

“And you *won’t* from now on, Mayor,” said Lucinda.

“Wonderful. Great job.”

And now, how about a dinner date, she thought.

“I’d like to bounce something off you, Lucinda. I’ve been working on my speech for tomorrow night, and there’s a spot that’s not quite right. But I just don’t know how to fix it.”

“I’ll be happy to help.”

The mayor read the passage, and asked her what she thought.

“Well, it sounds pretty good,” she said, getting up from her chair and walking around behind his desk. She pointed. “But right here—I would swap these two sentences. And remove this one. It’s redundant.”

“Yeah—I think you’re right. Thanks.”

Lucinda had never been on the front side of his desk. “Oh, this is a nice picture. What a fish.”

“Yeah, that was a great day.”

“Is that your son standing next to you?”

“Yes, that’s Andy. That was before he got into drugs and moved out of the house.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I blame Aaron. That’s him in the picture with us. He and Andy are best friends. And they’re a singing duo. They were actually very good—before the drugs.”

Lucinda gulped. “What are those necklaces they’re wear-ing?”

“They had those made right after they started performing in public. The ‘AA’ stands for Andy and Aaron. They were great kids—before they got all messed up.”

“Is that what led to your divorce?” She quickly added, “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“It’s okay. Yes, it was a big part of it. Peg thought I was too hard on Andy. I told him he could either give up the drugs or move out.”

“So, he chose to move out.”

“Yeah.”

“Out of town?”

“No. He’s still around. I saw him the other day walking down the sidewalk with Aaron. They were completely zoned out though.”

No, thought Lucinda, it couldn’t be.

“Well, thanks again. There will be a nice bonus in your next paycheck.”

“Thanks.”

She went to her office, closed the door, grabbed her purse off her desk, and began to riffle through it. She pulled the necklace out and held it up. There was an inscription on the edge of each of the seven sides. The lettering was so tiny that Lucinda had not even noticed it before. She strained her eyes to read each word: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, and Pride.

It was the seven deadly sins. And she had committed them all. “Oh, God, what have I done?”

---

LUCINDA FOUND it tougher than ever to fall asleep. It had been hard enough to live with the guilt of killing hopeless drunks and drug addicts. Now she had the blood of a teenager on her hands. Or maybe two...or more!

Somehow, she finally dozed off.

A couple of hours later she awoke to a sharp pain in her arm. She opened her eyes and saw a man standing over her. She tried to jump up and run away, but she couldn't even lift her head off the pillow.

The man's face was just beyond the range of the nightlight. She cringed when she saw the empty syringe in his right hand. No wonder she felt so weird and weak. He had drugged her.

He held up his left hand. The necklace dangling from it was the one she had so foolishly left on her nightstand. This man had somehow figured out what she had done.

He threw the empty syringe on the floor and leaned down to her. She could almost make out his face. Then he pulled a necklace out of the top of his shirt and let it hang from his neck. It was exactly like



the one in his hand!

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her speech was uncontrollably slurry. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for anybody to get hurt.”

The man took a syringe out of his pocket.

“Which one are you—Andy or Aaron?”

“I was the last one in the van. Whatever he drugged us with didn’t work as well on me. I ran into the woods before he could come walk back to the van and get me. After he drove off, I saw you holding Aaron’s necklace. And when I found out you worked for my father, I knew you were the one who had hired that man.”

He took the cap off the syringe.

“No. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” She began to weep. “I’m sorry. Please don’t kill me.”

He stuck the needle into her arm.

Lucinda had no strength to resist. She felt herself sinking into the bed.

The mayor had gotten what he wanted. The streets were free of homeless people. Maybe he would even get his son back.

Once the police figured out what she had done, it

would be easy for them to believe she had committed suicide. How could any decent person live with that kind of guilt?

Lucinda lay helpless as she melted slowly but surely into the narrow sinkhole...of her own MARGIN OF ERROR.

THE END

## SANTA CLOSET

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A YOUNG BOY thinks his Christmas is ruined when his family moves into a house without a chimney. 981 words.

---

*THE FOLLOWING IS a paper I recently wrote for my fifth grade English class. Mrs. Hilburn gave me an 'A,' undoubtedly for my excellent use of the language.*

Three long years ago, when I was seven, I had a lot on my mind. My family had moved into a new house right before Christmas. A house with no chimney.

And, like any discerning youngster, I immediately saw the handwriting on the wall.

No chimney, no Santa Claus. Period. The end.

I queried my parents concerning the dilemma.

“Don’t worry, Johnny,” they said, “Santa will find a way to deliver your presents.”

I was appalled by their laissez-faire attitude. This was a critical issue. I demanded a definitive answer.

They giggled, and told me I was cute.

But I didn’t want to be cute. I wanted my presents.

I found myself in a constant state of panic. My five-year-old brother, Billy, lived in his own little world. He was too young and immature to understand the ramifications of the situation.

Surrendering to the inevitable doom, I began to count down the dreary days.

On the first day of Christmas, Dear Santa gave to me: a woodpecker in a dead tree.

On the second day of Christmas, Dear Santa gave to me: two rotten eggs, and a woodpecker in a dead tree.

On the third day of Christmas, Dear Santa gave to me: three baby skunks, two rotten eggs, and a woodpecker in a dead tree.

It was going to be the worst Christmas imaginable. And I was powerless to do anything about it.

On Christmas Eve our house was filled with merriment. My dad read “The Night Before Christmas” in dramatic fashion. Mom led us in the singing of familiar, peppy Christmas carols.

I played along—just to make my parents happy.

Billy laughed and sang his heart out—completely oblivious to the impending disaster.

When it was time for bed, my parents gave their usual spiel: “You boys try to fall asleep fast, because Santa won’t come until you’re asleep.”

I wondered how they could be so naive. Did they really think Santa could somehow get into a house without a chimney? What was he supposed to do—come in through the plumbing? Pop his head out of

the toilet, and exclaim, ‘Merry Christmas?’ It was ludicrous.

So, for once in my life, I had very little trouble going to sleep on Christmas Eve. I had to tell Billy to shut up a couple of times. But after that, we were both out cold.

There would be no gifts in the morning—except the shirts I watched my mom buy for me at the mall. She had wrapped them up beautifully. And I would try to look thrilled when I opened the packages. But, come on—shirts are not even in the same league as bicycles and game consoles.

At 2:13 a.m., Billy punched me in the back. I rolled over, and was about to land a fist in his stomach when he whispered, “Listen.”

I don’t hear anything,” I said. “Go back to sleep and leave me alone.”

I rolled back over. Then I felt Billy get out of the bed. The nightlight projected a ten-foot shadow of my little brother on the wall as he approached the door.

“Come back here and get in bed,” I said. It was my responsibility to keep the little guy in our room.

My parents did not appreciate night visitors to their bedroom. So, you'd better have a very good reason for waking them up in the middle of the night.

He ignored me, turning the doorknob very slowly. He opened the door just a crack and peeked out. Then he looked back at me and began to wave wildly for me to join him.

I jumped out of bed and rushed over to Billy. I was sure he was getting excited about nothing. The boy has little understanding of the things of this world. But I couldn't let him wander into my parent's room.

As soon as I stuck my head out the door, my heart began to race. There he was. All dressed up in red and white, just as you'd expect. He had a long, white beard and wore a red cap. I never dreamed I would ever see him in person.

He was standing in the closet at the end of the hallway, loading his arms with bright-colored packages. Then I saw the bicycle. The one I had asked Santa to bring me.

My parents were right! Santa had found a way.

I decided there must be a hidden door at the back

of the closet. A door that only Santa could open. That's how he got into the house.

I felt a chill down my spine. Billy and I were on the precipice. We had already seen too much. I carefully closed the door, and we held our breath as we slipped back into bed. I prayed we hadn't ruined everything. I pictured our Christmas hopes plummeting into some black hole reserved for the lost dreams of the naughty, nosey children of the world.

But my fears were for naught. Christmas morning turned out to be the best ever. It was then that I realized my parents were perhaps somewhat wiser than I had always imagined.

Billy and I loved all our presents—especially the ones from Santa. But it wasn't just about the gifts. It was about the magic.

And now I know the truth. You don't need a chimney. Santa will find a way.

As you might imagine, I've searched for that hidden door at the back of the closet. But I've never found it. I figure it's just part of the magic of Christmas. That closet is like any other closet—until



Christmas, when it becomes...  
The Santa Closet.

THE END

MARY GOLDALORE

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MARY GOLDALORE IS VERY ATTRACTIVE, wealthy divorcee in her mid-thirties. She's also a bit naive—making her a prime candidate for a con artist's scheme. 3,525 words.

---

A TALL, slender woman in her mid-thirties spotted the two wealthy-looking women about her age at

the end of the bar. She picked up her martini, walked over and sat down next to them. "Are you ladies expecting company?"

Mary and Sylvia were overdressed, even for this fancy nightclub.

"I'm afraid not," said Mary." She saw the woman's eyes go to her chest. It was hard to tell whether she was admiring Mary's ample cleavage or the four-thousand dollar cultured pearls draped across it.

"Hi. I'm Dolly Otterman."

"I'm Mary Goldalore." When she held out her hand, Mary's diamond bracelet seemed to catch every light in the room. It was stunning, and she enjoyed showing it off.

"Sylvia Partov."

Sylvia's jewels were also quite impressive.

"I don't believe I've ever seen you two in here before," said Dolly.

"It's my first time," said Mary, sounding like a virgin in every sense of the word.

"Mine too," said Sylvia.

Dolly leaned in. "It's a great place to pick up

men.”

“Really? I was *hoping* to meet a nice gentleman,” said Mary, surveying the room.

“Well, believe me—it’s easy. I do it all the time,” said Dolly.

Mary noticed the wedding ring. “But you’re married.”

Dolly shrugged. “Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

“Weekends only.”

“I see—one of those *open* marriages.”

Sylvia began to squirm.

Dolly finished off her martini. “Did you see that hunk over there?”

“Where?”

“The guy sitting in the booth by himself.”

“Okay, yeah, I see him.”

“He is super hot. And loaded.”

Mary took a second look. “Then why is he alone?”

“He’s kinda shy. I went out with him once. Tried to take him to the *rabbit ranch*—if you know what I mean.”

“Huh?”

“You know—the horizontal hippie dance.”

The bartender overheard, and offered Mary a translation. “She tried to *do* him.”

“Oh,” said Mary. This Dolly person was a bit on the raunchy side.

“But he wouldn’t go for it,” said Dolly. “He told me he was looking for *true* love. How stupid is that? No wonder he’s sitting alone. So, I just thanked him for the nice dinner, and that was that.”

“Hmm,” said Mary.

“But we’re still buds. So, you want to meet him?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I—”

“—look, you came here to meet a man, right? And this is a nice guy—probably just your type. What do you say? I love playing matchmaker.” She looked over at Sylvia. “And then I can hook *you* up with somebody, Sylvia.”

“You know what?” said Sylvia with a nervous smile. “I believe I hear my husband calling me.” She grabbed her purse and stood up.

“Okay,” said Mary, “I understand.”

“See you tomorrow at the club,” said Sylvia.

“Okay, bye,” said Mary.

“So, Mary? You want to meet him or not?” said Dolly.

“I guess so.”

“Yeah, come on.” Dolly slid off the bar stool.  
“His name is Kyle Pickerpan.”

Mary followed her to Kyle’s booth. She casually checked the faces at each table as she walked by. Who was watching her do this? Anybody she knew? Then she spotted Jennifer, sitting with another woman in the booth adjacent to Kyle’s. She was one of Mary’s close friends—known to be a voracious gossip. Hopefully she would just mind her own business tonight.

“Hello, Kyle,” said Dolly. “How are you this evening?”

He smiled. “I’m fine, Dolly.” Up close, he looked younger and even more handsome.

“Well, I’d like to introduce you to my new friend. This is Mary...”

“Goldalore,” said Mary.

Kyle slid out of the booth and stood up.

He was about six foot, but his sleek build made

him seem even taller.

“And this,” said Dolly, “is Kyle Pickerpan—ladies man.”

Kyle appeared to be slightly embarrassed. “Glad to meet you, Mary.”

“Okay, then,” said Dolly. “I’m gonna leave you two love birds alone.” She walked off.

“Dolly’s a little rough around the edges,” said Kyle.

“Yes, I noticed.”

“Please join me. He offered Mary a seat at his booth.

“Well, okay—just for a minute.” She sat down across from him—well aware that Jennifer was right behind her, and would hear every word that was said.

“I just moved here to Atlanta a couple of weeks ago. I bought a lovely old home in Tuxedo Park.”

Homes in that subdivision appraised for five to ten million dollars.

Kyle went on. “Frankly, the house is too big for me. But I just fell in love with that area. I’m having the house renovated. Right now I’m staying at the

Omni.”

“That’s a nice hotel.”

“Yes. But I can’t wait to get moved into the house.”

“So, it’s just you? No family?”

“No. I’m still looking for Miss Right.”

“You must be very patient.”

“Why do you say that? Because I’m old?”

“No—I’m sorry. That was so rude. Please forgive me.”

He smiled. “No problem. Actually, I get that a lot. But so many of the women I meet are just looking to strike it rich. So, I have to be careful.”

“I know what you mean.”

“So, I assume you’re divorced.”

“Yes, for two years,” said Mary. “But what made you think I was divorced? Couldn’t I have been like you—still waiting for *Mr. Right*?”

He laughed. “Are you kidding me? Look at you. You’re just too beautiful to have made it this long without some guy winning you over.”

“Thanks...I think.”

“Hopefully he didn’t marry you for your



money.”

“No. He had his own money. That wasn’t the problem. He just turned out to be a major jerk.”

“You were lucky then.”

“*Lucky?*”

“He could have taken half your wealth.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I was lucky in *that* sense. But I was miserable for seven years, so I don’t feel very lucky.”

“How many years were you married?”

“Seven and a half.”

He laughed. “Why did you stay in a bad marriage for so long?”

“Because of my mother. I still remember her exact words: *I forbid you to marry him*. Then, at the wedding reception, she pulled me aside and told me I would be divorced within a year. I *had* to prove her wrong.”

“Well, sure. I can understand that. But why did you stick it out for all those years? Wouldn’t *one* year have proved her wrong?”

“Yes, it *would* have—if she hadn’t kept telling me I was being stupid for not divorcing him.”

He smiled. “Forgive me for saying so, but you seem to be rather stubborn.”

“Only when it comes to my mother.”

“So, why did you finally give in and get the divorce?”

“My mother died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did you two ever settle your differences?”

“Not really. But we *did* love each other. Arguing was just something we liked to do. I never fully realized it until her death, but those were our most fun times together.”

“To each his own, I guess.”

“Yeah, I know. Weird, huh? I don’t usually talk about this—especially on a first—”

“—date?”

“No, I mean—”

“—it’s okay. It really does feel like a date. Let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?”

“Well, we could go to my—never mind. That sounds like I’m trying to get you into bed.”

“What? Your hotel room? No, I didn’t think that

at all. I can see what kind of man you are. You wouldn't try to take advantage of me. But let's go to my house. I've got a huge fireplace. We can relax on the couch and talk. And have a glass of wine."

He smiled as he took her hand. "Sounds great."

She took out her cell phone.

"Charles? I'm ready to go home. And I have a guest...Thanks."

"Charles will be here with the limo by the time we walk out front," said Mary.

"Charles is your chauffeur?"

"Chauffeur and butler. He's been with me for years."

---

MARY SAT with Kyle on the plush leather couch in her den, talking and watching the flames flicker in the fireplace. Charles brought them two glasses and a \$150 bottle of Pinot Noir.

After several glasses, Kyle moved over closer to her. He began to kiss her and she began to melt. But when she felt his fingers fidgeting with her bra

strap, she pulled away.

“No, no,” she said. “None of that. Remember: you’re saving yourself for Miss Right.”

“I think I’ve found her.” He leaned in for another kiss.

She held him back. “It’s late. Time for bed.”

His face lit up.

“Correction: time for *sleep*.”

“Ah, come on, Baby.”

“I’ll get Charles to drive you to your hotel.”

Kyle made Mary agree to out with him for lunch the next day.

---

MARY HAD SELECTED an exclusive restaurant downtown.

“So, nice to see you again, Mrs. Goldalore,” said the head waiter.

She ordered a chef salad. Kyle had a sirloin steak.

“I love this city,” said Kyle.

“So, you plan to stay for a while?” said Mary.

“Definitely.”

“Good.”

“And I hope to spend a lot of time with you.”

“Wonderful.”

They had a nice conversation while they ate. Just after their bill had been delivered, the head waiter had dropped by for assurances that the quality of both the food and the service had been superb.

“Mary, maybe I’m way off base,” said Kyle, as he looked deep into her eyes, “but I really think we could have something very special together.”

She smiled warmly. “I think you may be right.”

He picked up her hand and kissed it.

“You know what?” she said.

“What?”

“Let’s celebrate.”

“Okay. Great,” he said.

“Let’s go.”

He threw two one-hundred dollar bills on the table as though they were worthless scraps of paper.

She took his hand and led him out of the restaurant, down the sidewalk to a jewelry store.

When they walked inside, he said, “So, you’re ready for an engagement ring?”

“No, silly.”

He looked disappointed.

“Not yet. Maybe in a few weeks,” she said playfully.

A salesman already had his eyes and ears focused on them.

“I *love* jewelry,” she said. “Ooh. Look at this ring.”

The salesman stepped up, took it out of the glass cabinet and showed it to her. “This would be a lovely addition to your collection, Mrs. Goldalore.”

“How much, George?”

Kyle didn’t seem at all surprised that the Mary and the jeweler knew each other by name.

“Twenty-five,” he said.

She turned to Kyle. “Would like to buy it for me, Kyle?”

Kyle swallowed hard. “Uh, sure.”

She lowered her voice. “If you ask me to marry you in a couple of weeks and I say ‘Yes,’ this can be my engagement ring. But I really want it now.”

“No problem,” said Kyle, smiling. “Wrap it up for her, George.”

George happily did just that.

“Twenty-five hundred, right?” said Kyle, handing George his American Express card.

“No, Sir. It’s twenty-five *thousand*.”

“Oh,” said Kyle, as his face turned pale.

“Is that okay, Kyle?” said Mary. Then she whispered, “I can cover it—if it’s a problem.”

Kyle cleared his throat and tried to smile. “No problem.”

“Deliver it to your home as usual, Mrs. Goldalore?” said George.

“Yes, thank you,” said Mary. She turned to Kyle. “I don’t like to walk out of here wearing a brand new piece of expensive jewelry. It’s just asking to get mugged. I’ll wear it to dinner.” She had assumed that a dinner invitation was forthcoming.

Kyle called his driver, and within a few minutes his rented limo pulled up outside the jewelry store. Mary would go home, take a nap, and freshen up for dinner.

---

AT 5:00 P.M. Kyle's limo pulled up in front of Mary's mansion. It was to be a very formal evening.

Kyle walked up the steps with a dozen roses in hand, and rang the doorbell.

A very attractive woman opened the door. She certainly was not a maid. She looked a lot like Mary.

"You must be Mary's sister."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Kyle Pickerpan. Mary and I have dinner plans."

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong address."

"No. I was here this morning with Mary. And last night."

"Mary who?"

"Mary Goldalore," he said.

She stared at him for a moment. "That's impossible—because *I'm* Mary Goldalore."

He hesitated. "Is this some kind of a joke?" He tried to look around her, to see inside. "Mary?"

"Sir, I'm the only Mary in this house."

"Let me talk to Charles, the chauffeur—he'll tell you."

"Okay. You're going to have to leave now or I'm



going to call the police.”

“It’s okay,” said a familiar voice from inside the house.

“Mary?” said Kyle.

*His* Mary joined the other Mary in the doorway.

“What’s going on here, Mary?” said Kyle.

“I’m not really Mary Goldalore. She is.”

“Then who are you?” said Kyle.

“My name is Janice. You might remember me as a brunette,” she said, pulling off the blonde wig.

“I don’t know *who* you are,” said Kyle, “but I want my ring back.”

“You really don’t remember me? It was about a year ago in Little Rock. I borrowed some jewelry and a dress from my employer and went to a nightclub. When you’re a maid it’s hard to get dates with well-to-do men. I figured if a guy thought I was wealthy he would give me a chance. Then he could get to know the real me.”

Kyle seemed to recognize Janice, but he didn’t say a word.

“And you did give me a chance. But when you took me home that night, you drugged me and stole

my borrowed jewelry. The next morning a realtor woke me up. He was showing the house to potential buyers. And it wasn't even your house."

"That wasn't *me*," said Kyle. "You've got me confused with somebody else."

"Gee, then that's quite a coincidence, since *his* name was *also* Kyle Pickerpan."

The real Mary spoke up. "So, Mr. Pickerpan, shall we call the police to discuss the ring? Or would you just like to call it even?"

He began to step backwards, toward the limo. "You women are crazy. I don't know who this man is that you're talking about, or why he's using my name. But I'm gonna find out." He opened the limo door. "Just keep the stupid ring." He got in and slammed the door. The limo drove away.

The two women began to laugh.

"We got him good, Janice."

"Yes, we did. Thanks for all your help. And it was so nice of your friend, Sylvia, to go with me last night. I don't think I could have pulled it off without her help."

"What about that Dolly woman—you think she

was Kyle's partner?"

"Definitely. She was just waiting at the bar, looking for prospects. She might have already talked to several women before we came in. Maybe they were married, or not rich enough. Who knows?"

"And then she saw you and Sylvia walk in—"

"—wearing tons of jewelry. But I would have been too nervous without Sylvia. Dolly would have seen right through me. I'm not much of an actress."

"Oh, but you *are*."

"Well, yeah, I guess I did okay, huh?"

"You totally fooled her and Kyle."

"But I really thought I was in trouble when I saw your friend, Jennifer, sitting in the next booth."

Mary laughed. "Yeah, I'm surprised she didn't say some-thing. But I guess she was too busy listening. She called me this morning to tell me what she'd heard. Of course, she had already spread the story about my maid going around pretending to be me. Now she feels pretty foolish."

"Serves her right."

"Well, I'm just glad you spotted Kyle yesterday morning when you were in town. I'm surprised you

recognized him. You were only with him that one night. And that was a year ago.”

“Are you kidding, Mary? I’ll never forget that face.”

“Well, now you’ve finally got your money back.”

“Thanks for writing me the check. Are you sure George will take the ring back?”

“Oh, yes. It’s no problem. We’ve done business for years.”

“He was great, by the way.”

“He called after you two left. I think he enjoyed being in on it.”

“Well, okay then. I’ve got my car packed, so I’ll head out now.”

“Please be careful. And let me know how you’re doing.”

“I will.”

“Maybe your mom’s health will take a turn for the better. I know it’s going to be tough caring for her around the clock.”

“Yes. But what else can I do? She’s my mother.”

The two women hugged and Janice walked out to her car and drove off.

---

“IT WAS A PERFECT PLAN—THE best ever,” said Janice, who was sitting in the front passenger seat of the Chevy Suburban.

“You *were* a very believable Mary Goldalore,” said Dolly from the back seat.

“I think all three of us deserve Oscars,” said Kyle, steering onto a two-lane road.

“I know you think we should stay off the main highway, Kyle, but this is kind of ridiculous,” said Janice.

“Yeah, look how dark it is,” said Dolly. “There’s not even any moonlight. If the car dies and the battery goes dead we won’t even be able to see our own hands in front of our faces.”

“Oh, Dolly,” said Janice, “don’t so melodramatic.”

“Well,” said Kyle, “we just need to get as far away from Mary Goldalore as possible right now.”

“Quit worrying,” said Janice. “There’s no way Mary has figured out that I replaced all her jewels with fakes. It would take a jeweler to tell the

difference. She won't know for months—or maybe even years. And even then, she'll never suspect *me*. We're like sisters." She laughed.

"I'm just playing it safe," said Kyle.

Suddenly there were headlights behind them—approaching fast. Then they saw the flashing lights and heard the siren.

"Were you speeding?" yelled Dolly.

"No," said Kyle. "Maybe a taillight went out. I don't know. But we'll be fine if we just stay cool. Put the bag of jewelry on the floorboard, Dolly—under your feet."

Kyle pulled over. They heard a car door open and close. Then they saw a very bright flashlight coming up from the rear. They couldn't see the man holding it. They could only hear his voice.

"Kyle Pickerpan?"

How could this cop know his name? Had Mary Goldalore somehow already realized she'd been conned?

"I need you to get out and step to the rear of the car—all three of you."

Janice thought the voice seemed familiar.

The three criminals got out and went to the back of the Suburban. They still couldn't see the officer—only his blinding flashlight.

“Okay,” said the cop, “I’m going to give you a chance.”

The three looked at each other. What was he talking about?

“I’m going to count to three...before I start shooting.”

There was no time to react. The cop said, “Three,” and began firing.

Janice lunged to the side and fell into a deep ditch that ran alongside the road. She heard Kyle grunt and then heard Dolly scream just before their bodies fell lifelessly to the ground.

She tried to run away, but her feet kept slipping in the mud. Then the beam of his flashlight found her, and she knew it was over.

“You can’t get away from me,” he said.

Suddenly Janice knew his identity. It wasn’t a policeman at all. It was—.

Before she could finish her thought, there was a flash at the muzzle, a bullet through the brain.

---

“COULD I please have another cup of coffee, Charles,” said Mary.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he quickly picked up the pot, walked over to the breakfast nook and filled her cup. “Beautiful morning, Ma’am.”

“Yes, it certainly is.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Are you absolutely sure you want to move to Miami? I hear it’s a lot more humid down there than it is here in Atlanta.”

“I don’t mind the humidity, Ma’am.”

“I know,” said Mary. “You just want to make a lot of money.”

“Well, it is a great opportunity. I’ve always wanted to run a bar on the beach. And my brother’s got the deal all lined up.”

“I’m sure it will work out just fine. But I’m really going to miss you around here.”

“I’ll miss you too, Ma’am.”

“Oh, no you won’t, Charles.” She laughed. “Now, you *are* giving me two weeks to find a replacement, right?”



“Oh, of course. I wouldn’t want to put you in a bind.”

“Good. Thanks. By the way, I hate that you missed all the excitement around here yesterday.”

“Oh, you mean the big showdown between Janice and that Kyle character?”

“Yes. It was great,” said Mary. “We got him good.” She smiled and then took a long sip from her coffee cup.

“Well, I’m sorry I missed it, Ma’am.” Charles turned around to put the coffee pot back in its place. “But I enjoyed my day off.” He smiled slyly to himself.

“I enjoyed it very much.”

THE END

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## YOUR PERSONAL PRESIDENT

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(NOTE that this story was written in 2008) The year is 2018. Television is obsolete. Everything is web-based. Watch any show whenever you want. And thanks to massive computer databases and powerful processors, all data is now saved. Place your grocery order. You don't have to specify what you want—they already know. Fries with that? They don't even need to ask. Everything can be personalized. Even The President of the United States. 2,457 words.

---

LIZ UNLOCKED THE DOOR, swung it open, and tried to push her suitcase through the door. It got hung on something and abruptly stopped—but she didn't. She fell on top the suitcase and rolled to the floor.

When she realized she wasn't hurt, she began to laugh. The three Margaritas still had her a bit loopy. But her first week on the job had been a tough one. She had needed to unwind.

Her phone rang. "Hello?" she said, still laughing.

"Hey, it's me."

"I just walked in the door, Marci."

"What are you laughing about?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You're at your new apartment?"

"Yeah, I just *dropped in*." She started laughing again.

"You've been drinking."

"How can you tell?" She giggled. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"So, what it's like?"

She walked around the apartment as she talked.

“Well, let’s see—tiny kitchen, small living room, small bedroom. Basically, it looks just like the one they showed me when I signed the lease.”

“Tell me about the bathroom.”

“I don’t think there’s much to tell.” She opened the bathroom door and turned on the light. “I can sit down while I put on my makeup.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Yeah—I’ll just have to remember to put the seat down.”

Marci laughed. “At least you’ve got your own place.”

“And my own pot.” She giggled. “I mean, you know—my own toilet. And now I won’t be mooching off my parents anymore.”

“And you need to have your freedom, Girl.”

“That’s right. So I can do stupid things, like getting drunk. Stupid.” She tried to shake off the grogginess. “So, when are *you* making the move?”

“My dad’s been ragging on me to get a place of my own. He says if I don’t, I’m gonna have to start paying him rent. Maybe I could get an apartment where you are.”

“I’m sure you could—it’s pretty cheap.”

“But it’s *government* housing, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a Federal POD.”

“Pod—that’s sounds kinda icky.”

“No, it’s not that bad. POD stands for *Private Occupancy Dwelling*. They’re supposed to be super-efficient. They were state of the art five years ago when they were new.”

“So, now you’re stuck with yesterday’s electronics?”

“Actually, it’s as good as what most people have in their homes. There’s a thirty-inch screen in every room except the living room. It’s got the standard sixty-incher.”

“Hey, that’s not bad at all. So, even if you can’t afford to go out, you can at least watch all your favorite web runs.”

“Oh, you know I wouldn’t have rented a place without good web.”

“So, you’ll have to invite me over soon. We can watch some of our favorite episodes of *Gossip Tree Creek* while we pig out on chips and dip. It’ll be just like old times.”

“Yeah, I could definitely go for that,” said Liz.  
“Do you like *Law and Order: HC*?”

“I haven’t ever heard of that one. How many different Law and Orders does this make? Fifteen? Twenty?”

“I’ve lost track.”

“What does the HC stand for?”

“Hard Core. Miley Cyrus plays this tough-as-nails judge. Her name is Willa Flushem. It’s a hoot watching her lower the boom on every stinking murderer and rapist that ends up in her courtroom.”

Liz admired a woman like Judge Flushem. One time, after she’d sentenced some creep to 75 years, he threatened to track her down as soon as he got out. He’d start by cutting off each of her fingers and then her toes.

But the judge doesn’t scare easily. She told him: ‘By the time you get out, I’ll be long gone, resting comfortably in my grave. But you can come dig me up, if you’ve still got the balls.’

The screen on the living room wall lit up.

“What the—?”

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m in the living room and the screen just came on all by itself.”

“Sure you didn’t sit on the remote?”

“I’m *standing*.”

“Weird. Hope you didn’t rent a lemon.”

“Well, I need to go, Marci.”

“Wait. Did you remember to vote?”

“Yeah, I remembered, but I haven’t done it yet.”

The voting age had been lowered from 18 to 16 in 2013.

“Come on, Liz. It’s been five years and you still haven’t exercised your right to vote.”

“I know. I feel kinda bad. But you’re an activist. It’s your *life*. I just don’t care that much about politics.”

“Well, you *should*. The things they do in Washington and in the state capitol have a direct impact on your life. And there are so many more opportunities to vote now that we have one-year presidential terms.”

“I know—you’re right. But I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“Well, you’d better figure it out soon—the

deadline is midnight. You want me to tell you who *I* voted for.”

“No, thanks. I’ll make up my own mind.”

“Well, it’s important, Liz. It’s our right and our duty.”

“Enough. Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

What *is* this? The male avatar on the screen had paused mid-sentence. Suddenly he began to talk again.

“—and I want to continue be *your* president. Your *Personal* President.” President Alfa was running for re-election. Liz had heard his campaign slogan a bazillion times: I want to be Your *Personal* President.

The screen went black. Then Senator Baita appeared.

“A vote for me is a vote for the future. There are only four hours left to cast your vote.”

Liz had assumed she was watching a prerecorded ad. This must be *live*, she thought. Live in *her* time zone. But, of course, they could do that now that campaigns used animated avatars. They



could target regional areas—or even neighborhoods since the avatars were computer-generated.

And because they were created on the fly, the latest polling data or other pertinent information could be incorporated into the message. The only limiting factor was the cost.

“Remember, it’s all about the future.”

President Alfa butted in. “Don’t listen to him, and his hollow promises. Remember—I am your *personal* president, Liz.”

What? How did he know her name? Liz had never seen an ad *this* targeted. The president’s campaign must be spending a fortune. They were apparently mining the public records database—right down to whose name was on a lease.

“You’re a beautiful young woman, Liz. You just graduated from college and you’ve got your whole life ahead of you. So, what you need is someone in the White House who will look out for your own personal interests. My challenger makes vague promises about the future. But what I offer is a personal relationship. What do you think, Liz? Will you allow me to be *your* president?”

Her jaw dropped. Her lease application didn't contain that level of detail, did it? They must be tapping into everything, she thought. They probably had the guest list of her Sweet Sixteen birthday party.

"Don't be shy. Tell me what you think."

Liz snatched up the remote, turned off the screen, and walked out of the room. She went into the bathroom and shut the door.

This was crazy. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She'd had those three drinks with dinner, but... just relax, she told herself.

She needed to pee anyway. But no sooner than she sat down, the screen that was built into the mirror lit up.

"I'm counting on you," said Senator Baita.

President Alfa broke in, and now the two were in split screen mode.

"Do you mind?" screamed Liz. "I'm kinda busy here."

"Well, normally I wouldn't mind," said the senator. "But this is critical. The survival of our nation could depend on your vote."

“He’s right about *that*,” said the president, “This could be very close, Liz. Your vote could decide this thing.”

“Can you see me?” said Liz.

“Yes,” said the president, “I can. But Senator Baita can’t. He doesn’t have access to Department of Defense technology, thank goodness.”

“But I can *hear* everything,” said the senator. “And Mr. President, I plan to launch a congressional investigation into your abuse of power.”

“Cool it, Baita, or I’ll appoint you Presidential Fisherman to Antarctica.”

“There’s no such post. And even if there was, I wouldn’t accept it.”

“You won’t have a choice.”

Liz screamed. “Get out. Get off. Leave me alone!”

“I can see you,” said The President, “but I’m not a real person. I’m just electrons in a computer. So, please don’t be offended. We’re both just political avatars—advocates for our candidates.”

“I *know* what you are. Get out!”

The screen went black.

When she got back to the living room, the screen

came on and a female avatar appeared, saying, "You will now test your remote to make sure the voting buttons are working properly. Please press either 'A' or 'B.' This is only a test."

"I'm not participating in any test," shouted Liz. "Just leave me alone."

The screen went black and Liz heard the woman's voice say, "You have successfully cast your ballot for Senator Baita. Thank you for participating in this presidential election test."

"I didn't push a button," said Liz.

The two candidates reappeared and began to argue with each other.

Liz ran to the kitchen closet, opened the breaker box and began to frantically trip the breakers, one by one. All the lights went off. The air conditioning stopped. Finally the screens all went dead.

The apartment was completely black. Liz took a deep breath and exhaled.

She was startled by a loud knock at the door.

She felt her way over to the door and looked through the peephole. It was Maik, the autobot leasing agent. She opened the door and looked up at

him. Liz was five-foot-four. Maik was seven feet tall.

“President Alfa is very disappointed that you did not vote for him.”

“What? I haven’t voted yet. It was just a test.”

“Did you believe him when he told you he wanted to be Your *Personal* President?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.”

“Then why didn’t you vote for him? What are your reasons? And please be specific.”

“I didn’t vote for *anybody*.”

He just stared at her.

“Hey—I’m not gonna discuss this with you.”

She tried to close the door, but Maik’s foot was blocking it.

“I need to know why you didn’t vote for President Alfa. You must give me an answer. My owner is being paid by the campaign. Do you promise to vote for him?”

You’ve got to be kidding me, she thought. This is illegal. “Sure, whatever.”

“Very good.”

“So, now will you please move your foot?”

“I must watch you vote.”

“Hey—I’ll vote when I’m good and ready.”

“No. You will vote *now*.” He pushed the door open, knocking her back.

She ran into the short hallway that led from the living room to the bedroom.

He ducked under the doorway and walked inside, closing the door behind him. His eyes lit up like lasers. He scanned the kitchen, but did not see her. Then he walked into the living room.

She wondered whether he could detect her breathing, or sense the warmth of her body. Hopefully he was a low-end model.

“I am not going to harm you in any way,” he said, removing his pistol from its hidden compartment as he continued to scan the living room.

She ran and leaped onto his back.

“You have miscalculated, Liz.” He began to spin around.

She was barely able to hang on. *If* he was a low-end model, she thought, there should be a power switch right about...here. She clicked it.

His spinning slowed and then stopped. Thank

goodness he was programmed to shut down gracefully rather than to just collapse. If his heavy body had landed on hers, she might have been a goner.

Liz climbed down. “Consider my lease hereby cancelled.”

She kicked him hard in the torso, and he tipped over and crashed to the floor.

---

“OH, I’m sorry, Honey. I didn’t know you were here. I thought you were spending the night in your new apartment.”

Liz rolled over in bed. “I thought I was too, Mom.”

“Well, just go back to sleep. I know you had a hectic first week on the job. I’ll see you later.” She closed the door.

What a nightmare, thought Liz. Her dreams weren’t usually so vivid. Maybe it was all that Mexican food she ate for dinner. No—it must have been the three Margaritas. She normally stopped at

one.

She remembered feeling tipsy when she left the restaurant. It was a wonder she had been able to drive home safely. She would never get behind the wheel in that condition again.

Liz tried to visualize her drive home. But what she saw confused her. She pictured leaving the restaurant and getting on the highway. But wait—she was going the wrong direction. Then she saw herself stop at the Federal POD. But it was just a dream, wasn't it?

She tried to block the false memories and see herself driving to her parent's house, and then walking into her old room and getting into bed. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not do it.

Liz shook her head like an Etch-a-Sketch, hoping to erase what shouldn't be there. It's a scary thing when dreams seem more real than reality.

She made herself take a deep breath and relax. None of it made sense. Maybe she just needed more rest. Yes, that was probably it. She lay back down, pulled the covers over her head and tried to turn off her mind.



She was just beginning to doze off when she heard the screen on her bedroom wall come to life.

“So, today I begin another productive year as your president.”

Liz spun around in bed and yanked the covers off her face. It was President Alfa’s avatar. Couldn’t the actual human give his own acceptance speech?

“I would like to thank all of you who live on Maple Street. Each and every one of you voted for me.”

She knew her parents had voted for Alfa. And the name of their street was Maple. Creepy.

“And thanks to those living in the Federal POD. All of you voted for me, with the exception of one man who unfortunately had a heart attack last night, and, of course, YOU, Liz.”

She gulped. Her entire body began to tremble.

“But I know you’ll vote for me next year, won’t you, Liz? I mean, why would you vote for anyone else? You need a voice in the White House that speaks for *you*. And that voice is *mine*. Because, always remember, Liz:

I am YOUR *PERSONAL* PRESIDENT.”

THE END

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## KORY MANTRA

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KORY MANTRA IS a 32-year old computer programmer who, after losing his job and his girlfriend, went on a diet and took up yoga. And to help him stick with it, he made weekly videos of his progress and posted them online.

By the time he reached his goal of losing 90 pounds, over a million people were watching his videos, cheering him on. Then a publishing company offered him a contract for a series of yoga

books and DVDs.

So, now he's a celebrity. But will he ever find true love? Or will he die trying? 6,136 words.

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KORY COULDN'T HELP but notice the attractive young woman sitting a few feet away, at the table in the corner. He didn't see a wedding ring. She was dressed as though she was meeting for a first date, he thought. Maybe a blind date.

Kory dipped another tortilla chip in the salsa and put the whole thing in his mouth. He tried not to stare, but his eyes kept wandering back to her.

A stout young guy in jeans walked to the woman's table. He was average height, but double-wide, with bulging muscles. The man's swagger seemed to be based on the belief that every woman in the room was salivating at the sight of his rock-hard biceps and pecs. His skin-tight T-shirt was the correct size for a five-year-old boy. Kory imagined it ripping apart at any moment, flying across the restaurant, and landing on somebody's plate of

refried beans.

Kory figured it must be the boyfriend. Not what he had expected.

“Looks like I’m just in time for dinner,” said the man, as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

“I want you to leave—right now,” she said sternly, without raising her voice.

“Oh, come on, Baby, you know you don’t really mean that.”

“I told you I didn’t want to see you again, and I meant it. So, either *you* leave, or *I’m* leaving.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Honey, and neither are you.”

The woman tried to get up, but he grabbed her arm and held it down against the table.

“Let go, Evan.”

“No. You’re gonna have dinner with me.” He continued to hold her arm.

“Let go of her,” said Kory.

He looked up to see the slim, but buff, six-foot-four stranger towering over him.

Evan’s eyes were cold and mean. Kory nearly flinched. For a second, he thought the big hulk

might jump up and rip his head off.

Evan released the woman's arm, and slowly stood up. "I'll call you later, Bella."

She looked as though she would have spit in his face if he had been closer. "Don't bother."

He walked off, winking at a sexy blonde on the way out.

Bella's demeanor abruptly changed. She looked up at Kory with warm eyes. They were exactly the same dark brown shade as her thick and lustrous, shoulder-length hair. "Thank you so much."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay. Good." He smiled. "Have a nice evening." He started to walk away.

"Wait. Why don't you join me for dinner?"

"Well, I—"

"—oh, how stupid of me. You're here with a date." She scanned the room, looking for an attractive woman who was sitting alone, watching them.

"No, it's not that. I just don't want to intrude."

"You're not."

“I mean, I didn’t run that guy off just so *I* could—”

“—do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“A wife?”

“No, but—”

“—just sit down.” She reached out and took his hand. “Please.”

Her grip was firm. Her skin was warm and soft. “Thanks. I hate dining alone.” He sat down across from her.

“Me too.”

“So, your name is Bella?”

“That’s right. Bella Cudry.” She extended her hand. “And you are?”

He shook her hand. “Kory. Kory Mantra.”

“Wait. *The* Kory Mantra? The guy who made all those videos about losing weight doing yoga?”

“Yep. That’s me.” He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “But hold your voice down. If people realize I’m here they might come over and start bugging me for autographs.”

“Wow, that’s cool. I watched some of your

videos on YouTube. How much did you finally lose?"

"Ninety pounds. I started at 275, and lost down to 185."

"Just by doing yoga?"

"No. I also rode a stationary bike, and cut my calories, of course. But without the yoga, I couldn't have stayed focused. And I would have ended up with a lot of flab hanging off my bones."

"Well, you sure don't have any flab. Your body looks lean and sculpted."

Kory looked down at his clothes, as though he wondered if they had just become invisible.

"I mean, I saw how great you looked in one of your later videos," she said.

A waitress came to take their order. They decided on the Chicken Fajitas for Two. Then a young man delivered a fresh basket of warm tortilla chips and two small bowls of salsa.

"So, now you're a yoga guru," said Bella.

"No, I'm not a guru. I'm just a guy who was desperate to get into shape. I went out and bought a bunch of yoga books and got serious. And now I



have my *own* book.”

“And I’ll bet it’s selling like crazy.”

“Yeah, it’s doing pretty well. But I only wrote about twenty percent of what’s in there. The publisher hired other people to write the rest of it.”

“Well, that doesn’t seem very honest—to put your name on the book, when you really only wrote a small part of it.”

“I know. I have mixed feelings about it. But haven’t you ever heard of ghost writers? Publishers do this all the time with celebrities. And they told me that my name would sell millions of books, which would lead to millions of people getting healthier and happier.”

“They conned you.”

“Yeah, sort of. But I knew there was some truth to what they were saying. And, hey, I was out of work. I needed the money.”

“What kind of work did you do?”

“Computer programming. But the small company I was working for in The Woodlands went out of business about a year ago. My girlfriend worked there too. So, we both lost our jobs at the

same time.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“I don’t *anymore*. She took a job in Austin and moved out of the house while I was on an interview. I came home and she was gone, along with all her stuff. The only thing she left was a very short goodbye note.”

“That’s cold.”

“Yeah. We had been together for almost a year. So, it was tough for a while. But I’m over her now.”

Bella seriously doubted Kory was over his ex, but nodded in agreement anyway. Why do men always think they can get over a relationship so fast? Women know better, she thought.

“So, I’ve met a few women online. And some of them sound nice.”

“Do they know who you are? I mean, do they know you’re rich and famous?”

“Oh, I’m not *rich*. I’m *comfortable*. But no, I don’t talk much about money. I’m hoping they don’t know about the yoga guy from YouTube.”

“Yeah, because they might just be interested in your money.”

“I know.”

“Or your good looks.” She smiled broadly.

His face reddened. He wasn't so sure about *his* looks. But *she* was amazing—especially when she smiled like that.

“Sorry—I didn't mean to embarrass you. But it's nice to see you haven't let the fame go to your head,” she said. I've thought about trying online dating, but I'm just not ready. I've spent the past two years caring for my grandmother full-time. I lived at home with my mom and grandmother while I was in college. But during my senior year, Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Shortly after graduation, she died.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“Yeah, she hadn't had a mammogram for a couple of years. She stayed so busy taking care of Grandma that she didn't take good care of herself. I felt guilty that I hadn't made sure she was getting regular checkups.”

“How's your grandmother doing?”

“She died about a month ago.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Well, at least she lived a long, good life,” said Bella.

“You must have really loved her. Most women would have put their grandmother in a nursing home. They wouldn’t have given up two years of their life the way you did.”

“Well, she had been suffering with heart disease for years. And I really didn’t think she’d hang on for more than another six months. But then she started feeling a lot better. And we were having fun together. We developed little rituals, like certain TV shows we’d always watch, certain meals we’d eat on particular days. And every Saturday night we’d get all dressed up and come here for dinner. This was her favorite restaurant.”

“So, that’s why you’re here on Saturday night by yourself.”

“Yeah. This is the first time I’ve ever come here without her. I thought it would bring back good memories. But it’s just making me sad.”

“So, what are you going to do with your life, now that she’s gone?”

“Get a job. My degree is in criminal justice

because I thought I wanted to be a cop. My brother was killed in a convenience store robbery when I was sixteen. It made me so mad—I just wanted to hunt down all the creeps and—“

“—blow them away?”

“Yeah. But I was a kid. I thought I could fix anything that was wrong with the world. Now I know it’s not that easy. My mom and grandmother left me the house and some money, so I’m doing okay. But I can’t just sit around every day doing nothing. Now that Grandma’s gone, my life is empty.”

“Well, you’ve got Evan.” Kory grinned, hoping she knew he was joking.

“Yeah. I wish I’d never met him. I had a leaky pipe in the kitchen. But I didn’t know any plumbers. So I just randomly picked one out of the yellow pages. I wish now I had fixed it myself. He kept flirting with me. And he was quite charming when he asked me for a date. I told him I wasn’t ready to start dating again. But he begged me to have just one dinner with him.”

“How did that go?”

“Fine, actually—until he took me home. He asked to come in for a while, and when I told him ‘No,’ he forced his way in.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. But a hard kick in the shin and a few screams made him change his mind. He called the next day and apologized. But then he asked me to go to a movie, and I said, ‘No, thanks.’ And ever since, he’s been following me around and showing up at my door several times a week. He’s driving me nuts.”

“Sounds like you need a restraining order.”

“I’m trying not to do that. But I might not have any choice.”

When they finished dinner, Kory paid the tab, and walked Bella to her car.

“Hey, we parked right next to each other,” said Kory.

“So, this is yours?” said Bella, pointing to the shiny black car.

“Yeah, I know—it’s old.”

“No. It’s a classic. It’s a ‘66 GTO, right?”

“I’m impressed.”

“I know cars—especially the cool-looking classics.”

Then, go for a ride with me, thought Kory. No—that sounds like a date. “Here’s my number.” He handed her a business card. “Call me anytime. And please let me know if you need any help with Evan.”

Bella smiled and held out her hand. “Thanks, Kory. And thanks for dinner. I really enjoyed it.”

I guess this means she wants a handshake, he thought, rather than the kiss he was dying to give her. “Me too.”

She got into her car and drove away.

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BELLA’S HOUSE was located on a corner, so the back yard could be seen from the street. But the last thing on Evan’s mind was whether anybody could see him. He had waited long enough. Tonight he was going to get what he wanted.

He could barely see her through the narrow gap alongside the window shade. Her skin was creamy white. When she took off her dress, he noticed that

she had no tan lines whatsoever. Come on, he thought, take it *all* off!

She stepped into a pair of jeans and pulled a sweatshirt over her head.

Enough watching. He was ready to go in.

He decided that the sliding glass door off the living room would offer the least resistance. There was no rod securing the door in its closed position—just the flimsy, built-in locking mechanism. He took out his four-inch pocket knife, flipped out the blade, and began to pry at the door. He knew he had to hurry. She might walk into the living room at any moment.

“Get away from that door!” the man’s voice shouted from behind him.

He whipped around with the knife, ready to slice whoever it was. But when he saw Kory standing there, he relaxed. “Well, if it isn’t Mr. Tough Guy from the restaurant.”

“I’m calling the police,” said Kory, taking out his cell phone.

Evan threw a fast, hard kick.

Kory hopped back, evading what would have



been a groin-crushing blow. But Evan's boot connected with Kory's right hand. The cell phone went airborne, flying halfway to the back fence, landing somewhere in the darkness.

"Go ahead—call the police, butt-face," he said with an evil grin, as he held up the knife. The entire thing was black—even the blade. "Ever seen one of these Bad Boys? It's got a super-sharp, Teflon-coated blade. So, when I stab you, it's gonna slide in so nice and easy that you'll barely even feel it."

"Look, Man, just walk away right now, and we'll forget this ever happened."

"Okay, fine." For a moment, Evan acted like he was about to leave. But then he ran at Kory with the knife.

Kory was not nearly as strong as Evan, but he was faster. He jumped to the right, barely missing the knife, and kicked the side of Evan's left knee as hard as he could.

Evan fell to the ground in agony, clutching his knee. But he quickly got back up to confront Kory again. He had dropped the knife and couldn't find it in the dark grass. Now the all-black weapon didn't

seem so cool after all.

He lunged at Kory and knocked him down. Then he climbed on top of him, and sat on his stomach. All the strength Kory had developed through his yoga routine could not compensate for his attacker's sixty-pound advantage. Kory's spine and arms were jammed down against the concrete patio. Their heads were two feet away from the sliding glass door.

"Wonder what would happen if I punched your head into the concrete a few times?" Evan laughed. He made a fist and slowly cocked his arm for the first punch.

It surprised both of them when the sliding glass door suddenly opened.

Evan looked up just in time to see Bella throwing a bucket of water at his face. Silly woman, he thought. Did she really expect to hurt him with a little water?

He looked straight at her, grinning, as the liquid rolled off his face. Then he laughed at her—until his eyes began to burn. "What is this? Acid? I'll kill you!" He held Kory's arms down with his knees,

and began to rub his eyes—which only made the burning more intense.

Miraculously, none of the Pine-Sol and water solution had splashed into Kory's eyes. He strained his neck to look back at Bella, and saw that she no longer had the bucket in her hands. Now she was holding a mop—by the wrong end.

She swung the mop handle at Evan, as though she was a big league slugger. Bella was gonna knock his head right out of the park. The wood handle cracked when it made contact, and Evan collapsed on top of Kory.

Kory rolled Evan's body off to the side, and stood up. "Thanks. He tried to stab me. His knife is out there in the grass somewhere."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He studied Evan. "We need to call the police. But first, we'd better tie him up. Got any rope?"

"I've got something better than rope." She hurried into the kitchen, got something out of a drawer, and came back. "These will hold him." She held up two pairs of handcuffs.

Kory was a little surprised. But then he remembered she had wanted to be a cop. “One for his hands and one for his feet?”

“No. The second pair is to hook him to the fence.”

“Good idea.”

They cuffed his hands behind his back, and then dragged his body to the nearby chain link fence that faced the side street.

Bella secured him to the fence with the second pair of cuffs. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“I don’t know. I think he could pull this whole fence loose.” Kory reached into his pocket for his cell phone. “I’ll call 9-1-1. Oh, I forgot—he kicked my cell phone out of my hand.” He walked back over to where they had fought and got down on all fours to search for it. “There you are. Ouch! I found the knife.”

“Did you cut yourself?”

“It’s just a nick, I think.”

“I’ll call from the house phone. And I’ll get you a Band-Aid.”

“And how about a flashlight?”

“Sure.”

Kory closed the knife and put it in his pocket. Then he resumed the search for his phone.

Bella called 9-1-1. Then she walked to the bathroom to get a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a bandage. She heard tires screeching, but just figured it was the teenager who lived across the street.

She grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen and walked out to the back yard. There was Evan, still unconscious, sitting against the fence.

“Kory?” She turned on the flashlight and shined it around the yard.

He was gone.

Then she heard a car engine start. She turned, and saw Kory’s GTO speeding away. That’s weird, she thought.

She couldn’t understand why Kory had taken off. She had really liked him. Perhaps after spending every day and night with her grandmother for two years she had lost her knack for reading people. Maybe Kory was not a nice guy after all.

Bella stepped on something. She turned the flashlight toward the ground. It was Kory’s cell

phone. She picked it up and put it in her pocket.

Then she noticed that Evan looked different. His head was resting awkwardly on his chest, and his tongue was hanging out. She leaned in to see if she could hear him breathing. Then she pressed two fingers to the side of his neck, and felt...nothing.

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KORY WAS DRIVING way over the speed limit. He was too pumped up to worry about the cops.

The house was a few miles north of Bella's place, on a country road. The nearest neighbor was at least a hundred yards away. When he saw the red pickup turn into the long driveway, Kory cut his headlights. The road completely disappeared for a couple of seconds, until his eyes adjusted. But there was little moonlight. He just hoped he could negotiate the right turn into the driveway without going off into the deep ditch. And in the meantime—what if a deer ran out in front of his car?

He slowed down, straining to see the driveway, and carefully turned in. He could have just driven

by, located a pay phone, and called the police. That would have been the safe thing to do. But what if this was the wrong guy? How could he be sure he hadn't lost him in traffic? He had seen three or four red pickup trucks along the way.

The man driving the truck had already gone into the house. Kory got out of his car. He would sneak up and look through a window, and hopefully be able to determine if he had the right guy. Then he would go find a pay phone and—

“—hold it right there!” shouted a big, deep voice.

A powerful beam of light blinded Kory. He froze.

“You're trespassing!”

“Uh, I'm sorry. I guess I've got the wrong house. I was looking for John Smith,” said Kory, grimacing slightly at the thought of his stupidity. Couldn't he have come up with a better fake name?

The flashlight got closer and closer, until it was six inches from Kory's eyes. Hot, rancid breath blew spittle into his face as the man spoke. “You know what I've always wanted to do?”

Kory was about to say ‘What?’ when he heard a metallic click in his left ear. Then he felt the hard,

cool muzzle against his temple.

“I’ve always wanted to take a big pistol, and put it up to a man’s head, and squeeze the trigger—just to watch his brains blow out the other side,” he said, laughing. “Don’t that sound like fun?”

“But wouldn’t your neighbor hear the shot? Wouldn’t he call the police?”

“Nope. Not unless he’s still up—which is doubtful. And even then, his hearing aid would have to be cranked up all the way. But don’t get your panties in a wad, Boy. Daddy wouldn’t be too happy if I killed you just for sport. He likes to do the killing himself. But I *could* tell him you made a run for it—and that’s why I shot you in the back. Wanna make a run for it, Boy?”

“Uh...”

The man chuckled. “Let’s go.” He pulled the gun away from Kory’s head and jammed it into his back. He held it there all the way to the house.

The red pickup was a big Dodge Ram Diesel, with dual rear wheels. About a \$50,000 vehicle, thought Kory. Parked in front of the truck were a brand new, dark blue Mustang, and a black Harley.



These are not poor people, he thought.

They walked across the wooden porch, and the man keyed in the security code and opened the front door.

The music of Steppenwolf was so loud it nearly blasted them back out the door. An old hippie-looking man with a beard, wearing a blue jean jacket, was standing in the middle of the room playing air guitar screaming, "Born to be wild!" He caught a glimpse of the two men out of the corner of his eye, grabbed the remote off the coffee table, and muted the sound system. "Who's this, Bobby?"

Kory finally got a good look at his captor. Bobby had a long strand of beef jerky hanging out of his mouth. No wonder his breath stinks, thought Kory.

Another man came rushing into the room from the side hallway. "I'll tell you who he is. He's the guy who attacked Evan tonight. Too bad Evan had to die. But he went and did something stupid, and was about to get himself arrested. So, I had to take him out, and save the merchandise."

That must have been what he took out of Evan's truck, thought Kory.

“Yeah, you done good, Son,” said the old man. He turned to Kory. “Billy is quite the marksman.”

Billy picked up a long, black object that was leaning against the wall by the fireplace. “These babies are high-tech. They make them out of aircraft aluminum tubing. I can hit the bulls-eye at 250 feet.”

Kory had never seen a modern blowgun.

“The dart comes out at 350 feet per second,” said Billy. “I use a special poison from South America. At first it just makes your body go all numb. Then your heart stops.”

“Yeah,” said Bobby, “it’s fun to sit on the back porch and watch Billy pick off stray dogs.”

“You know what? I’ll just *show* him how it works,” said Billy, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a thin metal case.

“Put them away, Billy,” said the old man.

Billy ignored him. “And just to make it fair, I’ll give him a good running start.”

“I said ‘No!’” The old man backhanded Billy, nearly knocking him down. “Put that thing away!”

That was close, thought Kory. But he feared his life expectancy was less than thirty minutes.

“Bobby, go out in the garage and get a couple of them tie-wraps,” said the old man.

When Bobby came back with them, the old man said, “Now, tie his hands behind his back, and then tie his ankles together.”

Kory had seen these heavy-duty tie-wraps being used on cop shows. It took a sharp knife or a pair of wire cutters to get the things off.

Bobby put a tie-wrap around Kory’s wrists, fed the tip through the self-locking end, and pulled it tight—nearly cutting off the circulation. Then he sat him in a wooden chair and put the other tie-wrap on his ankles.

Kory figured that if all three men were to leave the room for a couple of minutes, he might be able to hop to the door before they could catch him. But even if he somehow made it out of the house, Billy would surely nail him in the back with a poison dart. He had seriously miscalculated the danger of the situation. Why hadn’t he just driven by the house and called the police?

The old man slowly paced back and forth in front of his uninvited guest. “I need some information.

And you,” he said, reaching into his pants pocket, “are going to give it to me.” He pushed a button on the knife and the blade popped out, ready for action.

Kory still had Evan’s knife in his pants pocket. Nobody had bothered to pat him down. But with his hands tied behind his back, what good would it do him? “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Billy tells me that Evan had been dating a woman named Bella, and that you had dinner with her tonight.”

Kory looked at Billy. He didn’t remember his face from the restaurant. Maybe he was watching from the bar. “Yes, that’s right. I did have dinner with Bella. But I just met her for the first time tonight. I don’t really know her.”

“Then why did you follow her home?”

“I wasn’t following *her*—I was following *Evan*. I saw him drive out of the parking lot as she was leaving. I suspected he was going to follow her home. Turns out, I was right.”

“What did she tell you about Evan?”

“Just that she went out with him one time, and when he asked her out again, she said ‘No.’ After

that, he started stalking her.”

“What did she tell you he did for a living?”

“She said he was a plumber.”

“She didn’t say anything about drugs?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Good.”

“You don’t believe him, do you Daddy?” said Bobby.

“Yes, I do. He’s got an honest face. And I always trust my instincts,” said the old man, as he casually walked around behind Kory’s chair.

Kory suspected that the old man was about to cut his throat. If he hadn’t met Bella tonight, he wouldn’t be about to die. But at least he had saved her from Evan. And now she would be okay. Have a wonderful life, Bella, he thought. He wished he could have gotten to know her much better.

A loud siren started blaring, in front of the house. The old man and his two sons ran to the front windows.

“It’s my truck alarm,” said Billy, taking out his keys. He clicked the remote several times. “It won’t turn off.”

“Well, go out there and shut it down before some cop happens to drive by,” said the old man.

But no sooner than Billy had opened the front door and taken a few steps, he ran back into the house. He nodded at Kory. “His car rammed into the back of my truck.”

All three men glared at Kory, as though he had summoned his car, a la *Knight Rider*. Then they ran outside and frantically worked at silencing the alarm.

A voice from behind Kory said, “Let’s go!”

Kory turned his head and saw Bella. He showed her the tie-wraps. “There’s a knife in my right pants’ pocket.”

She took it out, opened it, and cut the tie-wrap off his ankles. Then she cut the one off his wrists.

Billy’s truck alarm went silent.

Kory and Bella heard somebody’s boots walking across the wooden front porch as they hurried out the back hallway.

“Daddy!” yelled Bobby. “He’s gone!”

The old man and Billy ran into the house.

“Catch him!” said the old man. “If he gets away,

we're dead!"

"I'll get him," said Billy. He picked up his blowgun and ran down the hallway, through the utility room, and out to the back porch. He could barely see the figure running across the grass toward the neighbor's house. He quickly loaded his weapon, aimed, and blew. Kory would fall to his knees, and then drop dead—just like the mangy old dogs he used for target practice.

"Why is he still running?" said the old man.  
"He's still running!"

"Hey, I see *two* people," said Bobby.

Billy blew another dart.

"I think you missed again," said Bobby.

"Why'd you go off and leave him alone in the house, Bobby?" shouted Billy. "This is *your* fault!"

"Uh-oh," said Bobby. "Look!" He pointed toward the road. Three sets of flashing red and blue lights were racing up the road. "They're coming here!"

Billy dropped the blowgun, and ran off the porch and around to the front yard. Bobby and the old man were close behind him.

Billy jumped into his truck.

Bobby got into the Mustang.

The old man jumped on his Harley and stomped the starter.

Just as the police were pulling up to the house, Billy drove diagonally across the front yard, through the ditch and onto the road, nearly colliding with two police cars that were just arriving.

Bobby and the old man drove out the other direction. But the cops quickly cut them off.

Bobby surrendered.

The old man tried to make a sharp U-turn, and slid down.

Kory and Bella watched the circus from the neighbor's driveway.

"How did you find me?" said Kory.

"There was a piece of paper in Evan's shirt pocket. It had the directions on it."

"He must have been planning to come here tonight to sell the drugs."

"Evan was a drug dealer? I can't believe I went out with a drug dealer."

"So, you just took a chance that this is where I



went.”

“Yeah. After I found the dart stuck in Evan’s back, I figured *you* hadn’t killed him.”

“So, at first you thought *I* had killed him?”

“Well, what was I supposed to think? I go into the house for two minutes, and when I come out, Evan’s dead and you’re speeding away in your car. But when I saw the dart, I figured that maybe you had gone after the killer. So, I followed the directions. It was the only clue I had.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“And when I got here I saw your car in the driveway. So, I parked over here and ran up to their house. I peeked in the window and saw that you were in trouble. I figured if I could distract them for a minute, you just might be able to escape. Fortunately, your keys were in the ignition, so I called 9-1-1 and gave them directions. I told them to look for a black ‘66 GTO. Then I started up your car, dropped it into ‘Drive,’ and just let it go up the driveway. I knew it would pick up speed as it went along. Then I ran as fast as I could, and went around to the back of the house, and came in just as the

truck alarm tripped.”

“But how could you be sure his alarm would be turned on?”

“Actually, I didn’t even think about the possibility of a car alarm. I figured the crash would be enough to get them out of the house.”

He looked at his wrecked GTO in the distance and wondered if it would ever be the same.

“And by the way,” she said, “the police are not going to be too happy with us for leaving the scene.”

“What do you mean? We’re still here.”

“I’m talking about the scene at *my* house—Evan’s body.”

“I think they’ll forgive us. We’ve just handed them three drug dealers.” Kory suddenly remembered Billy and his blowgun. “Did you hear something when we were running?”

“Like what?”

“Like a dart flying through the air.”

“No, but you were behind me. Turn around and let me check you.”

Kory turned his back to her.

“I need more light. Come over to my car,” she

said, leading him to the truck. She popped the lid, and the light came on inside. Almost immediately, the bulb burned out.

“Great,” he said. “But I guess if he’d hit one of us, we’d already be dead.”

She took hold of his shoulders to direct him. “Turn this way just a little. There.”

The moonlight was dim, but his pants were white, and looked almost glow-in-the-dark. “Hold still.” She put her left hand against his right butt cheek.

He didn’t have any idea what she was doing, but he kinda liked it. He felt her pull something off the seat of his pants. “What are you doing?”

“Getting this.” She held up a dart.

He turned back around. His face went pale when he saw it. “I didn’t even feel it.” He began to hyperventilate. “I must be going numb—just like Billy said I would!”

She dropped the dart in the trunk. “Relax. You’re gonna be fine. Take off your pants.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take them off—carefully.”

He slipped out of his shoes. Then he took his pants off, and held them out, by the waistband.

She took them, turned them around, and pointed to the right rear pocket. "Your wallet saved you. You're gonna need a new one." She dropped the pants into the trunk.

Without thinking, he grasped her head with both hands and kissed her on the mouth. He pulled away from her lips sooner than he really wanted to. "Thank you for saving my life, Bella."

She stepped back. "I was just returning the favor."

"Oh, I don't think Evan planned to *kill* you."

"No. But if he'd had his way with me, I would have *wished* I was dead."

"Hey, I'd better check *you* for darts."

"No. I was running in front of you. He couldn't have hit me. Besides, like you said, I'd already be dead."

"Turn around."

"Oh, alright." She turned her back to him.

"Let's see." He worked his hands carefully down her back and across her firm rear end and thighs.

“Hey.” She spun around.

“Looks like you’re dart-free.”

“Do that again, and *you’re* gonna be *hands-free*.”

She punched him hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped. Once he had caught his breath, he said, “Bella?”

“Yes?”

“You said you wanted to get a job. Why don’t you come to work for me?”

“Doing what?”

“You could be my personal assistant—taking phone calls, answering emails, stuff like that.”

“Sounds like a secretarial job to me. No, thanks.”

“Look, Bella, I need somebody I can trust. Not some nine-to-fiver who’ll go telling everybody my business. I want somebody who’s smart, tough, and discrete.”

“Somebody to come to the rescue when you get your butt in a bind?”

“I don’t usually get into *this* much trouble.”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe if I could take it on a trial basis, and just see how it goes....”

“Sure.”

“But no more kissing or grabbing. That’s not part of the deal.” She punched him hard in the arm.

“Ouch! You got me right on the bone.”

“Good.”

“So, you want to start on Monday?”

“Yeah, okay. And my first order of business will be to make you go out and buy some new boxers. Those things are ugly—even in the dark.”

Kory rubbed his arm. “I must be crazy. You’re gonna be a pain in the rear.”

“But I’ll keep you on track.”

“That’s what I need.”

They watched the police handcuff the three felons and stuff them into the back seats of their cruisers.

Kory moved in close to Bella’s side and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Careful,” she warned, smiling to herself.

THE END

## ROAD RAGE TO NOWHERE

*Copyright © 2008 Robert Burton Robinson*

ROAD RAGE CAN TAKE you on a trip to somewhere you've never been. And make you wish you hadn't gone. 1,264 words.

---

MIGUEL PUSHED his cart to the front of the small grocery store. Just as he reached an empty checkout lane and began to place his items on the conveyor

belt, a tall man in a business suit slipped in past him and handed a jug of milk to the cashier.

The man glanced back at Miguel. "I only have this one thing. I'm sure you don't mind."

Why should I mind? thought Miguel. After all, you're white. And you've been working in a nice office all day making tons of money. And you probably think I'm an Illegal—right? He started to say it all out loud.

But the man had already paid the cashier and rushed out the door.

When Miguel walked out of the store he saw the man sitting in a silver Lexus SUV. Why was he still hanging around? Thought you were in a hurry, Chump.

The man watched Miguel walk across the parking lot to a beat-up Ford Ranger extended cab. When Miguel was about to open the driver's door, the man rolled down his front passenger window and yelled, "Hey! Stop!"

Miguel wondered why Mr. Big Shot was hollering at him. Maybe he felt bad about the way he had broken in line, and wanted to apologize. Yeah,



right. He got into his truck, placing the two plastic grocery bags on the passenger floorboard. As he drove away he saw the man in his rear view mirror, standing in the middle of the parking lot, yelling and waving his arms.

Miguel had been on the road less than a minute when he saw headlights coming up fast from behind. The guy got right on his bumper and wouldn't back off—no matter whether Miguel sped up or slowed down. There were no other cars on the road.

Miguel rolled down his window and waved for the man to go around.

But the man seemed determined to ride his tail all the way. Then he started flashing his headlights.

This guy's nuts, thought Miguel. Just a tap on the brakes would cause a collision.

The man kept flashing his headlights like crazy.

Miguel exited onto a dark two-lane road.

The Lexus followed him.

Miguel stomped on the accelerator.

The Lexus stayed right behind him.

Enough, thought Miguel. He slowed down and

pulled to the side of the road.

The Lexus pulled over and stopped behind him.

Miguel jumped out of his truck, hopping mad. He didn't even bother to turn off the engine or shut his door. He stormed up to the man's window and screamed, "What's your problem, Man?"

The guy rolled down his window.

Miguel was not about to back down, even though he could see that the man was upset too. "Get out of your car and let's settle this right now!"

"But—"

"—but nothing! I'm sick and tired of being treated like this. You think I'm illegal, don't you?"

The man started to speak, but Miguel cut him off.

"Well you're wrong, Man. I'm just as much a citizen of this country as you are. And I work my butt off every day building houses for rich punks like you. But you think that makes you better than me, don't you? Just because you work in a nice clean office all day wearing an expensive suit you think you're high class and I'm low class. But I'll tell you right now—if it wasn't for guys like me who are willing to get their hands dirty and work all day in

the blazing sun—you wouldn't have any fancy office building to work in."

Miguel noticed the man's right arm beginning to move. It all happened in a split-second, but it seemed like much longer—as in slow motion. He could barely see the man's arm in the glow of the instrument panel lights as he raised it higher and higher.

Had he underestimated this guy? Was that a *gun* in the man's right hand? Miguel knew he would not be able to react fast enough. If the man wanted to kill him—he would be dead in two seconds.

Then he saw what was in the man's hand. Nothing. He was pointing at Miguel's truck.

Miguel turned his head just in time to see his truck beginning to move forward. Had he left it in gear? Then he saw a hand pull the door closed. The truck sped away.

Miguel looked the man, confused.

"That's what I was trying to tell you. I saw a man get into your back seat as I was coming out of the store. And I thought he looked suspicious, so I wanted to warn the owner of the truck. But I didn't

realize that you were the owner until I saw you walk over to it. I yelled to try to get your attention. But you ignored me. So, I followed you.”

“I’m sorry, Man. I thought you were—”

“—you thought I was crazy. I know. Maybe if I hadn’t been so rude in the store. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.”

“Well, hop in. Let me take you home, or wherever you need to go.”

“Thanks, Man.” Miguel walked around to the passenger side and got in.

“What’s your name?”

“Miguel.”

“Glad to meet you, Miguel. I’m Jack. If you want, I’ll follow that guy. We could probably still catch up with him.”

“That’s okay. I was about ready to replace that old truck anyway. It’s a piece of junk.”

Jack smiled as he reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a business card, and handed it to Miguel. “Jack’s Used Cars. I can make you a great deal on a fine pre-owned automobile, Miguel.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, not at all. How much are you looking to spend? What kind of monthly note can you handle?”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Get out!” Miguel reached under his shirt and pulled out a pistol. “Now!”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I don’t appreciate your attitude, Jack.”

“What? I was just trying to help you.”

“Fine. You’ve helped me. Thanks for the car. Now get out!”

Now it all made sense to Jack. “That guy who stole your car—you two are working together, aren’t you?”

“Good for you, Jack. You figured it out. You’re a smart guy. Or at least you were until five seconds from now when you’re gonna be dead!”

Jack held up his hands. “Okay, okay.” He opened the door and began to get out.

“Wait,” said Miguel.

Jack froze in place.

“I hear sirens. Did you call the police?”

“Well, yeah. I thought that guy might be

planning to kill you, so I called 9-1-1.”

“Get back in.”

“Are you sure?”

“Get in the car!”

Miguel opened his door and got out. The sirens were coming toward them from behind.

“Take off. And drive as fast as you can.” Jack slammed the door. “Now!” He pointed the gun. “Or I’m gonna start shooting. Go!”

Jack peeled out and drove away.

Miguel hid in the nearby bushes while the two police cars raced by. Then he walked out to the road and stood there watching, as the flashing lights got smaller and finally disappeared.

Fools, thought Miguel.

He took out his cell phone. “Hey, come back and get me...Yeah, he called the cops...It’s no big deal, Man. It won’t take long to find another sucker. But hurry up—before they come back here.”

Only two patrol cars had responded to Jack’s 9-1-1 call. Miguel was surprised there weren’t more.

There were. The third cop was trying to catch up—driving 125 mph, without siren or flashing lights.

It was already too late to get out of the road by the time Miguel heard the car coming up from behind.

THE END

WRITER'S BLOCK

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A FICTION WRITER is tormented by the man who made him famous. 857 words.

---

HENRY Poured the rest of the wine into his glass. He enjoyed the privacy of the dimly lit corner booth at the back of the restaurant.

“Feeling inspired today, Henry?”



Henry ignored Antonio.

“Time to get fired up. Write another bestseller.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? Your series is over. Done.”

Henry’s speech was so slurred that Antonio struggled to understand him. He would have tried to take away his car keys, but Henry no longer owned a car. The repo man had picked it up early that morning. “You can’t mean that, Henry. My books made you famous.”

“My publisher doesn’t want another Antonio book.”

“Why not? You’ve only written four.”

“You know why not. Sales were way down on the last one. The critics tore me to shreds...I mean...shreds.”

“Trust me, Henry. The fifth book will be frigging fantastic.”

The waitress delivered another bottle of wine. Henry thanked her and she walked away.

“How do you plan to pay for that wine?” said Antonio. “Do they know you’re broke?”

“My credit is good here.” Henry uncorked the

bottle and refilled his glass, spilling some of it on the table. "Look, I don't really care what the critics say. My fans are tired of you."

"Tired of me?" Antonio sat up. "No, Fool, they're tired of your crappy writing."

"Hey, don't you dare take that tone with me. I'm a famous author."

"So, write like one. It's not my fault that you make me sound boring."

Henry shook his head. "I don't know how I ever made it work. A gang leader as hero. Crazy."

"But it did work."

"Yeah. For three books." He gulped down the rest of his glass, and began to refill it. "But it got old."

"No, Holmes, you got old. Your writing got stale. You were just going through the motions."

"Because I got tired of you. Okay? There, I've said it."

"Whoa. You got tired of me? My stories are exciting. Dangerous. And besides, if you're so tired of me, why haven't you already written a book that's not about me? It's been two years, Man. Why

haven't you moved on?"

Henry's response was to take another sip of wine.

"I'll tell you why. Because you've got writer's block. And you know why? Because you're too stubborn to write what you're supposed to be writing. Quit fighting it, Dude."

"Another Antonio book."

"That's what I'm talking about. And it's easy, Man.

All you've got to do is follow your muse."

"And I suppose you are my muse."

"How do you think you wrote those first three books? Why do you think they were pure genius?"

"Because you...inspired me."

"That's right, Jack. I'm you're muse. And you shouldn't have tried writing that fourth one without me. You shut me out, Man. You thought you could go it alone. Well, I hope you've learned your lesson."

Henry fumed. "Get out of here. Go, and never come back. I don't ever want to see you again."

"Take it easy, Holmes. You need me. You can't

write a great book without me.”

“I don’t care. You’re making me crazy. Just go!” He motioned with his wine glass, sloshing the red liquid all over the table.

“You still don’t get it. You can’t do it without me.”

“If I never write another word it will have been worth it, just to get you out of my life.” Henry words were barely intelligible.

“Without me, Man, you ain’t got no life.”

“Are you listening to me? I want you gone! Dead.”

“Oh, really? Dead?” Antonio searched Henry’s eyes. “Well, there’s only one way that’s gonna happen, Man.” Antonio pulled out his pistol.

“What are you doing? Put that thing away.” Henry held out his hands in a vain effort to protect himself, knocking over the bottle. The wine flowed freely onto the tabletop.

“You’ve had your say, Punk. There’s no turning back.” He rotated the gun ninety degrees, gang-style. “It was a great life while it lasted, Man.”

“No!”

Antonio squeezed the trigger.

---

CAUSE OF DEATH: Unknown. No heart attack. No stroke. Henry's only injury was a bruise on his forehead, an obvious result of his head hitting the table. The heart had been functioning normally. Then it just stopped.

The waitress told police she thought she heard Henry talking to someone as she was walking up to his booth to deliver a bottle of wine. Yet when she arrived, Henry was sitting alone.

The lead investigator suspected someone had poisoned Henry's wine with some undetectable substance. He knew that authors sometimes make enemies with their writing. But he had no leads.

The ex-wife knew who had killed Henry. Although, she would never tell the police. Or anyone else. They wouldn't believe her anyway.

Over the course of their marriage, she had learned one of the best kept secrets of great fiction writers: the characters are real.

Sure, the writer creates them. But once created, they are forever in his life. To bring him joy. To give him comfort. Or to torture him.

Until the day he dies.

THE END

## BUCKTHIRSTY

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SOME PEOPLE WILL DO *anything* for a buck. You might call them *buck-thirsty*. 2,128 words.

---

TRAVIS AND TARA were thirty-somethings who lived in an affluent suburb. Travis spent most of his time on the road. But when he did come home to his live-in girlfriend, he brought major cash.

Tara loved cash. She even loved Travis—as much as a woman like her was capable of loving a man.

Sometimes she wondered exactly what kind of work her boyfriend did to make all that money. But she didn't have time to think about it too much, since she was so busy shopping and hanging out with friends.

Tara ran to greet him at the front door. "Have a good week?"

"Yep. I've got another satisfied client."

"Great, Honey. Where are we going for dinner? I'm craving a big, juicy steak."

"Oh, Sweetie—I'm kinda tired. Couldn't we just stay in and order a pizza?"

Tara pretended to be hurt. "Well, I guess so."

"I need to make a few business calls."

"Okay. No problem."

"Thanks, Baby." He kissed her on the forehead and then walked toward his study.

"Pepperoni or Meat Lover's?" She reached into her pocket for her cell phone.

"Pepperoni's fine."

After Tara had ordered the pizza, she went to the



study. The door was closed, as usual. Months earlier Travis had sound-proofed the room—ostensibly to shut out the noise from the living room TV.

She hated it. What was he doing in there? What was he hiding? She often wondered if he might be having an affair. It would be easy. In fact, he *could* have a girlfriend in every city he did business in. How would she know?

Not that she cared so much about fidelity. That was not the issue. Her concern was that he might dump her for another woman. That would mean no more country club, no more shopping sprees, no more...*anything*. She would be broke—out on the streets.

In the ten years since college, she had never made use of her business degree. And she wouldn't be able to get the kind of job she needed to support her lavish lifestyle. Her skills were more valuable in the bedroom than in the boardroom.

Tara hurried to the bedroom, reached into her dresser to the back of her panties drawer. She grabbed the device she had recently purchased from a website. It was an electronic stethoscope for

listening through walls and doors.

She hid it behind her back as she walked quietly to his study. The door was still closed. Her heart began to race as she put on the headphones and placed the diaphragm against the door. She turned up the volume until she could hear him talking.

“...watched her strip. She walked around the room for a while, naked. She had a very sexy body, Man. And even though she didn’t know I was watching—it was like she was teasing me. Finally, she got into to bed and turned off the light. I let her doze off for a few minutes. Then I nailed her.”

Tara gasped. Then she quickly covered her mouth. Had he heard her? She tiptoed to the bedroom and put the device back in its hiding place and closed the drawer. When she turned around, Travis was standing in the doorway. She jumped.

“You okay?” He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“Well, I’m starving for that pizza. Hope you ordered an extra large.”

“Of course.”

He took off his suit coat and laid it on the bed.

Then he walked over to Tara and took her in his arms. “And later I’m going to be starving for something else.” He slid his hands down to her butt and pulled her against himself.

“Yeah, Baby. Can’t wait.” She smiled, but wondered if her smile looked forced.

---

ON MONDAY MORNING, as soon as Travis had left for the airport, Tara put on a provocative outfit and drove into town to visit John, Travis’ attorney.

John gave Tara the once over as she walked into his office. The outfit is working, she thought. She wasn’t ‘smoking hot’ anymore, but she was still sexier than just about anything else walking down the street.

“So, what can I do for you, Tara?”

Judging by the way he was eying her chest, she knew exactly what he *wanted* to do for her. And if she were available, she just might *let* him do it.

“Before I get to that...just out of curiosity...has Travis made any changes to his will lately?”

“No. Why?”

She smiled. “Oh, you know me. I always worry about things.”

“You’ve got nothing to be concerned about, Tara. Travis loves you very much.”

“I know.” She paused. “The reason I’m here today is that I have this friend...”

“Yes?”

“Actually, she’s a friend of a friend. And she’s got an abusive husband. She’s called the police several times. But he’s got buddies on the force, and they won’t do anything. So, she just wants to get out.”

“I see. But you realize I’m not a divorce attorney.”

“Yes, I know. She can’t divorce him anyway. He says that if she tries to leave him, he’ll hunt her down like a dog and rip her heart out.”

“Sounds like a rough customer.”

“Yeah. And I just thought you might know of somebody who could...”

“What?”

“Somebody who could *take care* of the guy.”

John frowned. "Hold it. You really think I would be involved with people like that?" He stood up and walked to the side of his desk, ready to escort her out. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Tara stood and stepped in close to him. She placed her hand on his arm and looked up into his eyes. "Please, John. I apologize for even asking for your help—but I don't know where else to turn. And this woman is desperate. That creep of a husband could kill her this very day."

John shook his head.

"Surely you can give me some idea where to go for help."

"Well...I do know this lawyer. I take that back. I don't really *know* him—I know *of* him. He handed me his card at a conference. I don't know how he even got into the place. He practices out of his car, I think. Let me see," he said, walking around to his desk, checking his computer. After a few mouse clicks, he said, "Here it is." He read the name and phone number aloud as Tara wrote it down on a scrap of paper from her purse. "I don't know

whether he'll have any useful advice for you, but you can give him a try."

"Thanks, John."

He led her to the door. "And don't tell anybody I gave you his name. I don't want to be associated with that scumbag in any way."

---

TARA DROVE AROUND for twenty minutes before spotting a pay phone.

"Hello. Is this Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Attorney at law—at your service."

"Somebody gave me your number. I don't remember who." She went on to explain about the problem her friend of a friend was having.

He put her off at first, but after some pleading he finally relented, and gave her a phone number.

"What's his name?"

The line went dead.

She called the number.

"I'm sorry—I don't know your name, but a man gave me your number and—"

“—what’s the job?” the man said coldly.

It was a very deep voice—almost too low to be real, thought Tara. Perhaps he was altering his voice electronically. She didn’t care—as long as he could give her what she needed. “It’s my husband.” She gave him their address and told him when to do it: Friday night.

---

WHEN TRAVIS GOT home on Friday night, Tara had a lovely, romantic dinner waiting for him. Later she made passionate love to him. When they were done, she got up and went to the kitchen for her after-sex ice cream. Sure—it was mega calories. But still, it was much healthier than her old after-sex *cigarette* habit.

Travis was beginning to doze off when she walked back into the bedroom. “We’re out of ice cream.”

He didn’t budge.

“Honey?” She shook him gently. “Honey, wake up. We’re out of ice cream.”

“I’m tired. Please just let me sleep.” He rolled away from her.

She shook him harder. “Please, Baby. You know I’ve got to have my ice cream.”

Travis began to snore.

“Honey! If *I* have to go out, I’m gonna buy a carton of *cigarettes*.”

“Oh, alright.” He forced himself to get up and get dressed.

As he was walking out the front door, she said, “Thank you so much, Baby. You’re so sweet.”

It’s done, she thought. Travis would never be back with the ice cream.

Tara went into the bedroom and sprawled out across the bed. She was going to be rich. She’d finally have her *own* money. She fantasized about all the things she was going to buy.

---

TARA WAS EXPECTING a call from the police at any minute. But instead, she heard somebody coming in the front door. She checked the clock on the



nightstand. It had been thirty minutes since Travis left. No sooner than she got up from the bed, he walked in.

“Surprised to see me?”

“Uh, no. But what took you so long?”

“Didn’t you expect me to take a lot *longer*? As in *forever*?”

“What do you mean, Honey? I was worried about you.”

“Really? Then why didn’t you try calling my cell phone?”

“I don’t know...”

“I know why.”

Tara had a sinking feeling.

“It’s because you thought I was dead!”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You didn’t think John would tell me?”

It was no use denying it anymore. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I must be sick or something. Maybe I need to see a psychiatrist. Yeah, that must be it. I need help.”

“After all I’ve done for you.”

“Well, don’t act like you’re Mr. Perfect. I

overheard you talking about a woman you were with."

"What?"

"Last Friday night—you were in your study. I heard you say she was walking around naked and then after she went to sleep you nailed her!"

"So, you thought I had *sex* with her."

"And you're going to stand there and tell me you *didn't*?"

"That's *exactly* what I'm telling you." He reached around to his back to get something.

"So, you're just going to explain away the fact that you *nailed* her?"

"I nailed her with this." It was a large pistol. He reached into his left pants pocket to retrieve the suppressor, and attached it to the end of the barrel.

"What are you doing?" Tara held her hands up, as though they could deflect the bullets.

"I'm doing what do I do for a living?"

"You told me you were in sales."

"You didn't care what I was doing—as long as I brought home the money." He aimed.

"Wait! Who was that lawyer I called—that Mr.

Johnson. Was that *you*?"

Travis grinned slyly. "Yep. Pretty convincing accent, huh? The hit man was me too. Oh, and by the way—John is the one who sets up jobs for me."

"No wonder he called you."

"Yeah. His legal practice is just a front. He's my pimp. And I'm one of his girls."

"You're *good*, Honey." She smiled sweetly. "Of course, I've always known that about you. You excel at everything you do."

"Thanks." He lowered the gun slightly. Could he really kill this woman that he loved? He had been deeply hurt when he found out she wanted him dead. But now he knew it was because she was jealous. She didn't want to lose him. Sure—she didn't want to lose his *money* either. But now that he realized there was no other man involved...

"Please, Honey."

He put the gun back under his belt. "I'll give you a few days to get moved out. Take anything you want."

"Thanks," she said, relieved.

When he reached the front door, he heard

gunfire behind him. A bullet hit him in the leg. He spun around, whipping his pistol out as two shots caught him in the chest.

He returned fire with a single bullet, surgically placed right between her eyes. She was brain-dead before she hit the floor. Who did she think she was messing with? *He* was a professional.

But her *lucky* shots would prove just as deadly as his professional one.

Travis lay on the stone floor of the foyer oozing blood, unable to move, trying desperately to stay alive...as his mind faded to black.

THE END

## FACE TO FACE

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ONLINE CHEMISTRY IS ONE THING. Face to face can be something entirely different. 1,206 words.

---

HARLEY SMILED as she sat in the dark with her laptop, looking at Jeremy's profile picture. The handsome young man was perfect—even better than the last one. And he lived in a house, which was a

big plus.

They had chatted online for weeks and really seemed like a great match. Tonight's date would be the moment of truth. Online chemistry is one thing. Face to face can be something entirely different. Harley knew it all too well.

Jeremy had suggested dinner at a fine restaurant.

Harley told him she would prefer a more intimate setting.

He liked the sound of that, and said he would be happy to prepare spaghetti, salad, and garlic bread. He admitted it was one of the few meals he knew how to cook.

Harley arrived at his door wearing her best blond wig. It always made a better first impression than the short, brunette hair hiding beneath it. Besides, that was what he would be expecting, since she was wearing it in her profile picture. And as they say, blondes have more fun.

They also say that blondes are dumb. That gave her an advantage. Harley was anything but dumb.

"Wow," said Jeremy, "you're even more beautiful than your picture."

Harley heard him say beautiful, but knew he was thinking sex. The man was practically drooling.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling.

“Come in.”

As she walked in past him, she could feel the heat of his eyes trained on her tight butt. It was so easy for Harley to get men excited. Like flipping a switch.

“You lied in your profile,” said Jeremy.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no way you’re 5-foot-10. I’m six foot, and you’re definitely taller than me.”

“Oh, it’s the heels. Sorry. I’ll just slip them off, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, make yourself at home.”

Now he was staring at her feet—a little too long. Foot fetish?

“That’s more like it,” he said. “Sorry I called you a liar. Guess that’s no way to start a date.” He smiled and winked.

“No problem.” She smiled. Some guys were so insecure. Would he really be devastated if she was two inches taller than him?

“You know, you remind me of somebody.”

“Really? Who?”

“I don’t know. But it’s driving me crazy. I’ll figure it out.”

“Well, you know what they say.”

“Everyone has a double?”

“Right.”

“I hope that’s not true. There’s this old man at work—he’s so ugly I can hardly stand to look at him. Surely there can’t be two of him. I don’t know—maybe in some foreign country, where they have mostly ugly people.” He laughed.

“I guess.” This guy might not deserve a woman, thought Harley.

“Okay,” he said, “just make yourself comfortable. I need to go pop the dinner rolls into the oven.”

“Mm, great. I love rolls.”

He grinned at her, and walked into the kitchen.

What? Did he think she was throwing him a double entendre? I love to eat rolls and I love rolls in the hay. That’s exactly what she was doing.

Harley saw a framed picture on an end table and



went over to check them out. It was Jeremy, standing arm in arm with an attractive woman. When she held the picture up close, she saw her own reflection, ghost-like, hovering over the couple in the photo.

The woman in the picture looked almost identical to Harley. Was Jeremy a complete idiot, a compulsive liar, or a weirdo?

He walked into the room, and seemed startled when he saw her holding the picture.

“So you couldn’t think who I reminded you of? What kind of game are you playing?”

“It’s not a game. I forgot that picture was out.”

“So you meant to hide it from me?”

“I just didn’t want you to freak out.”

“Why would I freak out? Because you only date women who look exactly the same?”

“I wasn’t dating her.”

“Oh, really? You two look pretty chummy to me.”

“It’s my sister. Two years ago, she married this rich guy from Ireland and moved back there with him. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Well, that’s even worse. You’re drawn to women who look like your sister?”

“No. Not exactly.”

“You were hoping to have sex with me tonight, weren’t you?”

“No. I mean...yeah, I guess.”

“At least now you’re being honest about something. Apparently, you and your sister had a very sick relationship.”

“No, no. Nothing like that.” He stepped in close to her and gently took the picture out of her hands and dropped it on the couch. “I really like you. Yes, you do look like my sister, but that doesn’t matter.”

“So if I kissed you right now, you wouldn’t be thinking of her?”

“No, of course not.”

Harley grabbed the back of his head with both hands and pulled his lips to hers. She didn’t know whether he was thinking about his sister, but he was definitely enjoying it—especially after she slipped her tongue into his mouth.

But his enjoyment faded quickly after her razor blade sliced his neck and the blood began to spurt.

He jumped back, holding his neck with his hand, staring at Harley in disbelief. “Why?” He collapsed to the floor. “Please, call 9-1-1.”

Harley pulled off her wig. She took a moist towelette from her purse and wiped the makeup off her face, and would have stripped naked. But there wasn't time. Besides, she was sure Jeremy could now see that she was not a woman.

Harley crouched over Jeremy and saw the confusion in his eyes—when looking at someone else is the same as looking in the mirror. He and Harley could have been twins.

“Goodbye, Jeremy. And thanks for the new life you've given me.”

Jeremy looked confused. “Please, help me.”

“Yeah, they say everyone has a twin. But you know what I've found, Jeremy?”

Jeremy said something unintelligible.

“I've discovered that we all have multiple lookalikes. We're quintuplets—and we don't even know it.”

Harley stood up and looked around. “So this is my new house. Thanks. And my new name is

Jeremy. I like it. That's a good name."

Jeremy tried to speak.

"I'll forgive you for getting blood on my carpet. Fortunately, I have experience with this type of cleanup. I've done it many times. But I know what you're thinking. DNA evidence and all that. I'll never get away with it, right?"

Jeremy struggled to breathe.

"But you see, the police will have no reason to suspect anything. I'll buy a big freezer to store your body. And I'll just start living your life. Nobody will suspect a thing. I'm very good at faking it. You might even say it's my life's work."

Jeremy's eyes began to close.

"Sooner or later my luck will run out here, and I'll have to move on. But no problem. I've already located the next me. His name is Benjamin, and he lives in London. I'm working on my British accent. I'll have it perfected by then."

Jeremy was barely hanging on.

Harley bent down. "It was so good to finally meet you, Jeremy—face to face."

THE END

## SUN-POWERED CAR

*Copyright © 2008 Robert Burton Robinson*

A WASHED-UP TV reporter sees a chance for a big story when he discovers an amazing invention while passing through a small town. 1,364 words.

---

IT WAS JUST another lousy day in the life of a has-been TV news reporter.

Malcolm was past his prime. And at age 57, he'd

long ago given up on his dream of sitting in the anchor chair. But the assignments he'd been getting recently were just downright degrading.

It was a three-hour drive back to the city. He was starving. Didn't they at least have a McDonald's in this crummy little town? He decided to stop at the next restaurant he saw—no matter what it looked like.

Helen's Hamburgers: the best burgers in town, the sign read. Malcolm suspected that Helen's might be the *only* burger joint in town. The fact there were no cars parked in front made him hesitate. He checked his watch. It was only 11:00 AM—too early for most lunchers.

He parked his car and got out. Just as he was about to go inside, he heard something coming up the street. It was too noisy to be a bicycle, yet too quiet to be a car. He turned around.

The brakes squeaked on the 1957 Chevy Bel Air 4-door hardtop as it pulled in behind his car. It was in decent shape for a 50-year-old car. But an odd-looking luggage rack had been bolted to the top. Malcolm hated to see a great classic car defiled like

that.

But why was the engine so quiet? Then he realized that the flat thing on top of the car was not a luggage rack—it was a solar panel.

A middle-aged man wearing overalls got out of the driver's seat. Two husky twenty-something guys in jeans, T-shirts and boots got out of the back seat.

Malcolm held the door for them. The older man thanked him. The three men took a seat at a round table near the front window. Malcolm picked a spot several tables away.

A woman in her mid-forties wearing a flowery 1950's style day dress walked to the men's table. "Howdy, Ned. How are you boys doing today?"

"We're fine, Helen."

"Well, what'll you have?"

One of the younger men looked like he was about to speak when Ned said, "Just give us the usual."

"Okee-dokee." She walked around behind the counter and yelled back to the kitchen as though she were calling hogs, "Three triple cheeseburgers with onion rings, one vanilla shake and two chocolate



shakes.”

“Got it,” shouted a male voice.

The bell on the door jingled as a middle-aged man in a black and gray beard entered the restaurant. His jeans had obviously never been near a washing machine. And his cowboy hat was so crumpled that Malcolm guessed the man slept in it every night. “What that heck did you do to your car, Ned?”

Ned grinned. “I finally got it right, Jake. It’s my crowning achievement.”

The men discussed Ned’s car for a few more seconds. Then they talked about Jake’s chickens for a while.

“What can I get you today, Sir?”

Malcolm had not noticed Helen approaching his table. And he hadn’t even looked at the menu that was printed right on the table.

“Uh...what do you recommend?”

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“But you do look kinda familiar for some reason,” said Helen.

Malcolm tried not to smile. “You ever watch Channel 12 News?”

“Yes. Sometimes. It’s not my favorite, but...”

“I’m their senior reporter. Been there for over 25 years.”

“You’re the anchor?”

“No, I’m not an anchor. Should have been, but never quite made it.”

“Oh—are you the guy who reported the big high-rise fire last week?”

“No.” He sighed. “I was on a farm that day. The people said they had a high-jumping pig. They claimed it was destined to break the Guinness World Record of 27.5 inches. That stinky animal couldn’t even clear a cinder block.”

“I’ve never heard of a jumping pig.”

“I wish *I* hadn’t. Just give me a hamburger, fries and a coke.”

“Coming right up.” Helen turned to walk away.

“Oh, one other thing, if you don’t mind,” said Malcolm.

Helen turned back around, smiling. “Onion rings?”

“Uh, no thanks. I just wanted to ask you about that man over there—Ned.”

“Yes? What about him?”

“I heard him telling that man with a beard that his car was sun-powered.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that something? He finally got it working.”

“He did it himself?”

“Yep. He loves to invent stuff.”

“Is that what he does for a living?”

“No. He’s a farmer. But he used to work for an aircraft company. Until they shut down. Then he took over his daddy’s farm.”

“Interesting. Thanks.”

Helen walked away.

Malcolm’s mouth began to water—but not for the burger and fries. What a story, he thought: Farmer outsmarts young high-tech whipper-snappers, building the first practical solar-powered automobile—in the form of a ’57 Chevy!

A young waitress delivered the food to Ned’s table, and the three men began to gobble it down. By the time Malcolm had reached them, they were half

finished. "I apologize for interrupting your lunch, but I just had to ask about your car."

Ned smiled as he continued to chew. "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

"Yes. And I overheard you say that the car is sun-powered."

"That's right," said Ned.

The two young men both nodded in agreement as they stuffed their faces.

"So, does it use any batteries?"

"Sure—for nighttime driving."

"Of course. Because there's no sunlight."

"Yeah. I can't be driving around in the dark. Might hit a cow. Besides, it's illegal."

"You mean you only have batteries so you can run your headlights?"

"And taillights. *One* battery. That's all."

"You're kidding me," said Malcolm.

"Nope. Just the one six-volter."

"Wow. That's amazing." Malcolm suddenly realized that he wasn't writing anything down. But how could he possibly forget any of this? "Mind if I take a closer look?"

“No problem.” Ned sucked down the rest of his shake, took a few bills out of his wallet and dropped them on the table. “Come on.” He stood up and proudly led Malcolm out to his masterpiece.

“Check this out,” said Ned, popping the hood.

Malcolm could not keep his jaw from dropping. There was nothing under the hood except a six-volt battery, strapped down with a bungee cord.

Ned closed the hood and walked around to the side of the car. “Back here is where the action is.” He opened the back seat door.

Malcolm was confused. “What is this?”

“This is where the power is applied.”

Malcolm took a closer look. The floor board where the passengers’ feet normally rest had been cut out to make room for what appeared to be bicycle gears, chains and pedals.

“I thought you said this car was completely solar powered?”

“*Solar* powered? Heck, no. I said it was *son*-powered. That’s what I call it—my son-powered car.”

The two young men walked out of Helen’s and

took their places in the back seat, positioning their cowboy boots on the pedals.

“Well, then what’s this?” Malcolm pointed to the solar panel on top of the car.

“That’s a solar panel.”

“Then why don’t you use it?”

“I tried. But it only gives me enough power to run the headlights. And I don’t need the headlights in the daytime.” Ned got into the driver’s seat and shut the door. “Let’s go, boys.”

His two sons began to pedal as Ned steered the car onto the road.

“Nice talking with you,” shouted Ned as they drove away.

Malcolm stood there shaking his head. He should have known better than to think he would be so lucky. He went back into Helen’s and started eating his lukewarm ham-burger and fries.

Then it hit him. Ned’s car was not the technical break-through story. It wasn’t the solution to skyrocketing oil prices. But it *was* a quirky, human interest story. And he was going to get it!

He threw some cash on the table, rushed out of

the restaurant, jumped in his car, and sped off. Ned could not be more than a few blocks away.

It was *not* going to be a lousy day after all.

THE END

HEART OF GOLD

*Copyright © 2010 Robert Burton Robinson*

A GOOD OLD boy discovers a solution for his failing heart. 1,270 words.

---

I'LL NEVER FORGET that day in my cardiologist's office. "Roy, you've got to give up sausage, smoking, fried food, Ding Dongs, and salt.

I said, "Doc, why don't you just give me a lethal



injection right now?"

He told me there was a better solution. Heart of Gold Clinic. "I hear they work miracles over there."

Heart of Gold. They sounded like wonderful, caring doctors.

"But they're expensive."

"I'll pay anything, Doc. But I ain't about to give up poker night with the boys." Fried shrimp, hushpuppies, Coleslaw, fries, and all the Budweiser you could drink. Big cigars and raunchy jokes. By 5:00 a.m. the smoke was so thick you couldn't see halfway across the table.

Even though I was willing to pay whatever it took, I didn't have much money to spare. Maybe if I had put off buying that new pool table and the 60-inch high-def TV. Oh, and my extended cab, 4×4 diesel pickup truck. But a man's gotta have his boy toys. And how was I to know this heart trouble stuff was gonna come along and kick me in the butt?

Anyway, that's what insurance is for, right? I could handle a small co-pay. So I made an appointment at the Heart of Gold Clinic. The secretary told me to get there early for registration.

No problem, I thought. It would be the usual questions about medical history, insurance and employment.

But instead of handing me a clipboard of forms, the secretary led me to the finance guy's office. He explained that my procedure would not be covered by insurance.

“How much money are we talking about?”

When he told me, I think my heart literally stopped beating. For like three or four seconds.

“But don't worry,” he said. “We a have finance plan for every need. Very few of our customers pay cash.”

He said customers. Didn't he mean to say patients? I should have realized right then and there that something was funny about the Heart of Gold Clinic. But it was my only hope—unless I wanted to start exercising.

“How much monthly payment can you afford?”

It's so clear to me now. I should have noticed it at the time. He sounded like a car salesman. They never want to talk about the bottom line. It's only about whether you can afford the monthly payment.

Later you find out you paid \$5,000 too much.

I was afraid to lowball him. Somehow I couldn't see him making a counter offer. And this was life or death. "I could probably handle \$300 a month."

"Hmm." He messed around with his computer for long enough to make me nervous.

I was about to blurt out a bigger number when he said, "I think we can make that work."

The printer on his desk began to spit out a bunch of pages. I wish now I had read them before I signed.

Dr. Milca Hue was a small Asian woman. Quite beautiful. In fact, I would have asked her out if my divorce had been final. She seemed very smart. There was nothing to make me hesitate about going under her knife.

She explained that my new heart would be made of space-age plastic and electronics. The dang thing had four computers in it. But don't ask me about computers. I don't know squat.

My surgery was a complete success. I felt like a new man. And the best part was that I didn't have to give up any of my bad habits. This newfangled heart

keeps all my arteries cleaned out. So, whatever the thing cost, I figured it was worth every penny.

And the coolest part is the remote control. When I go to bed I set it on Sleep Mode, and sleep like a baby.

When I need extra energy for football with my buddies, I just crank it up, and I can play like a maniac. It's so much better than my original equipment.

But that \$300 monthly note got to be a problem. Especially after I traded in my year-old pickup. The new model was so hot. I just had to have it. But my new truck note is \$895 a month.

That's when I started having trouble paying my bills. As hard as I tried, I could not cover everything. I didn't want to be homeless. And I sure as heck didn't want to be truck-less. So I skipped my Heart of Gold payment for a couple of months. What were they gonna do? Repossess my heart?

I was surprised when I got a text message one day—warning me that my account was past due. It urged me to re-read my contract. I had two days to bring my account up to date.

I thought, what are they gonna do about it? Send a guy over to break my legs?

The next day I got another text message. YOUR ACCOUNT IS 60 DAYS OVERDUE. CONTRACT OPTION K WILL BE DEPLOYED AT MIDNIGHT.

Are you kidding me? I wasn't gonna pay it now even if I did have the money.

But as midnight came around, I started to get anxious. Would there be a knock at the door? No. It had to be a bluff.

Still, I sat in my kitchen watching the clock. It's one of those atomic clocks, so I knew it was accurate. As the second hand clicked its way toward 12, I began to sweat. Only fifteen more seconds until midnight.

Ten seconds. I felt my heartbeat begin to race. I checked the readout on my heart remote. Pulse: 92. Higher than my normal resting rate, but no need for alarm.

Five seconds. Pulse: 104.

Four seconds...three...two...Pulse: 127.

Midnight.

Pulse? The display had gone blank.

I felt the side of my neck with my fingers, desperately trying to find a pulse. It wasn't there.

They were killing me for non-payment.

I checked the clock. I don't know what I was expecting.

At five seconds after midnight, my heart started beating again.

That was scary, I thought. Must be some kind of glitch in the software. I would get it checked out the next day.

As I began to relax, I laughed at myself. What was I thinking? That my heart was being controlled remotely by somebody at the clinic? How ridiculous. They had made me paranoid with those weird text message warnings.

Then, at twenty seconds after midnight, my heart stopped again.

Six seconds later it restarted. I panicked. Was this a pattern? My heart stops for five seconds, six seconds, seven... At that rate I would be dead before an ambulance could get there.

My phone beeped. It was a new text message.  
PAY BY MIDNIGHT TOMORROW OR THERE

WILL BE NO RESTART.

I was hopping mad. They can't get away with this, I thought. I would show this text message to the police. Then the message disappeared. I didn't delete it. It was just gone. Their earlier messages were gone too.

The next day, I found the money to bring my account up to date. And I've never been late since.

I probably should try to warn other people about Heart of Gold. But I know they won't listen. They don't want to take care of their bodies. They don't want to have to work at getting into shape. They just want an easy fix.

They're fools. Just like me.

But at least now I understand what Heart of Gold really means.

You get the heart. They get the gold.

THE END

GOVERNOR HOOKS A LADY

*Copyright © 2008 Robert Burton Robinson*

THE NEW GOVERNOR is flying high—until a certain lady brings him back down to earth. 762 words.

---

“I’M JUST NOT comfortable with this, Lucas.”

“Look, Henry, it’s just another task. You’ve always done everything I asked of you without question. This should be no different.”



“But, Sir, it *is* different. You’re the youngest governor the people of this state have ever elected. Honestly, I wasn’t sure we could pull it off. But we did. And now that we’re here, we just can’t take chances anymore. The other side would do anything to bring you down. And if word of this ever leaked out—”

“—just set it up exactly as I told you and nobody will ever know. She’ll never see me. She’ll never even hear my voice.” The governor stood up from his enormous desk—a not-so-subtle hint for his long-time advisor to leave.

Henry stood up, but was not ready to go. “What if she doesn’t follow the instructions? What if she turns on the lights?”

“No problem. I’ve got the National Guard at my disposal. I’ll just give them a call and—”

“—Sir, this is not funny. If anybody ever finds out, you’re dead in the water. And it’s not just you. What about your staff? You’re putting us all at risk. So, you see, Sir—it’s not really worth it.”

The governor turned around and gazed out across the finely-manicured lawn below. “Just do it,

Henry. And get out of my office—you're starting to irritate me. You don't want to irritate the most powerful man in the state, now do you, Henry?"

"No, Sir." He paused. "I'll take care of it, Sir."

---

CREAMY WAS NOT her real name. Philip had bestowed that lovely alias upon her some two months earlier. When she had first approached him, he'd been hesitant to hire her. But after clients began to rave about her skills and ask for her by name, he knew he had made the right decision. She had quickly become a prime money-maker.

So, it was no surprise that Philip had chosen her for this \$2,000 job. He'd finally made the big-time. And he wanted to be absolutely sure this special job got his money's worth.

Creamy had been impressed when Philip told her the location for the job. She'd spent a few nights within the ornate walls of the fancy hotel, but never transacted any business there.

Philip had gone over the instructions with her at

least five times. She pushed on the door and it opened, as expected. A key card dropped to the floor. She realized that the client had lodged it between the door lock and the frame.

She quickly stepped inside. In the split second before the door closed she saw that the john was in bed, with the sheet pulled over his head. This too was expected.

At first, all she could see was the moonlight seeping in at the edges of the curtain. As her eyes began to adjust, she located the outline of the bed.

Her instructions stipulated that neither she nor the john would speak. Moaning, panting, and heavy breathing were all good—but no talking was allowed.

She stripped down to her negligee. She wasn't quite sure how to handle the no-talking rule. Some of the most effective tools in her arsenal were verbal. She could really get a guy going with what she said—and the *way* she said it. So, this would be her greatest challenge.

Creamy lifted the edge of the sheet and slid into bed with the mystery man. Wait—did she know for

certain it was a man?

The governor began to put his hands all over her body.

*Feels like a man's hands, she thought.*

First, he felt her chest. Very nice, he thought. And he liked her flat stomach. The thighs were firm. At any moment he would rip off her flimsy nightie and get down to business. He loved getting down to business—as a litigator, as lieutenant governor, as governor, as a lover. In each and every capacity, he was voracious and insatiable.

Creamy sensed that he was about to attack. She could handle whatever he threw at her. But she wondered what he looked like. She ran her fingers through his hair and began to feel his face. Then she felt a small mole at the top of his left ear. She quickly checked below the earlobe—and found the *other* mole. She knew she wasn't supposed to speak, but she couldn't help herself. "Lucas?"

The governor jumped back in horror. "Mother????!!!!!!!"

THE END

DONORLOTTO

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COMBINING BLOOD DONATION AND GAMBLING. What could possibly go wrong? 1,322 words.

---

I DROVE into the parking lot of DonorLotto, Inc. “Are you sure about this, Man?”

Mark grinned. “Definitely. My sixty days are up and I am ready to go again.”

“You don’t think this place is a little creepy?”

“Not at all,” said Mark. “It’s a great way to get people to donate blood. And that’s a good thing, right? Encouraging us to help our fellow man.”

“While hoping to win a thousand dollars,” I said. “Why can’t people give blood for free, like they used to—with no strings attached?”

“They can. But most people don’t. That’s why they passed that new law,” said Mark. “When is the last time you gave blood?”

“It’s been...a while. But, you know, I’ve been busy.”

“Well then, Dude, you ought to play too. Give some blood. Win some money. The odds are 50 to 1. That’s way better than the regular lottery.”

“But how do they do that? Think about it. With those odds, it’s costing them twenty dollars for each person who plays the game.”

“Hey, I don’t know how they do, and I don’t care. All I know is that last time I walked out of here with one-thousand bucks in my pocket. Cash money.”

“That’s crazy.”

---

MARK FROWNED at the young woman behind the desk. "You mean I have to answer all those same questions again?"

"No, Sir. Not at all. You're in our system now."

Mark winked at me.

"Sir, I'm required to ask you this: Did you read the contract completely and carefully, and do you understand what you are agreeing to?"

"Yeah. Sure," said Mark.

"Then I just need your signature."

Mark picked up the stylus, and scribbled his signature on the computer pad.

The woman signed as a witness. "Okay, Tony, he's ready to go."

"Right this way, Gentlemen." Tony led us into a 10-by-10 foot room.

I was surprised at the thickness of the door, and wondered if it was soundproof.

Mark took a seat in the leather recliner.

I sat beside him in a straight chair.

Tony swung the game console around,



positioning it right in front of Mark.

Mark immediately pushed the Go button, but nothing happened. "It's not working."

"Just a moment," said Tony. "We need to get you all hooked up first."

"Oh, right."

I looked away while Tony inserted a needle into Mark's arm and taped it in place.

Tony pressed a few buttons on a large, heavy-looking piece of equipment labeled, Blood Limited Extraction Electronic Device (B.L.E.E.D.). "Okay, Mark. You're all set. With each press of the Go button, you'll get one chance to win, while donating one ounce of blood."

"I understand," said Mark. "Thanks." He pressed Go, and the three reels on the game console screen lit up and began to spin. "Come on, Baby. One thousand smackers. Give it to me."

The first reel stopped on a picture of a cat. The second reel also stopped on a cat.

"This is it, Man," said Mark. "Here it comes!"

The third reel stopped on dog.

"Damn," said Mark. "I was so close."

The B.L.E.E.D. machine buzzed. According to the readout, one ounce of blood had just been extracted via Mark's arm.

"That's okay," said Mark. "This time I really feel lucky." He pressed Go.

Two dogs and a cat.

Once I got used to the idea, it was sort of fun watching him play. After all, it was for a good cause. And Mark had a great shot at winning the money.

---

I STOOD UP. "Okay, Mark, it's time to stop."

"Not yet, Buddy. I'm so, so close. I can feel it in my veins."

"That's the blood—leaving your veins. Look, Mark." I pointed to the readout on the B.L.E.E.D. "You're at 50 ounces, Man."

"But I'm feeling fine."

"Well, you're not looking fine."

"I'm almost there. Just a couple more tries."

"I don't know, Mark. I think you're at your limit."

He pressed Go, and shouted, "Do it!"

I kept trying to convince him to quit, but nothing worked.

Then Mark went silent. I glanced at the readout: 68 ounces. Over four units of blood!

"Mark?"

He didn't move.

"Mark, wake up!"

Still nothing.

I ran to the door. It was locked. I started banging.

"Help! I need help in here!"

Soon, Tony walked in.

"Why did you lock the door?"

He ignored me, checking Mark's vitals.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He's alive." Tony pressed a button on the wall.

"I need a stretcher in Room 12."

A man's voice responded over the speaker. "It's on the way."

I got in Tony's face. "Where are you taking him?"

"Please step back, Sir. We are simply following the terms of the contract."

“Terms of the contract? What terms?”

Two men in blue scrubs rolled a stretcher into the room.

Tony pulled a lever on the side of the recliner and lowered the back to a horizontal position.

I yelled at all three men, “What in the hell is going on?”

“Please step back, Sir,” said one of the men, as they transferred Mark to the stretcher.

I screamed, “I demand to know what you’re doing with my friend.”

One of the men took an envelope out of a plastic bag that was hanging from the side of the stretcher. He handed it to me. “Read the terms of the contract.”

I stood dumbfounded as they rolled Mark out of the room.

After they were gone, I opened the envelope and scanned the copy of Mark’s contract.

*If, in the course of playing The Game, The Donor becomes unconscious, Section III of this contract shall be invoked.*

I skipped to Section III.

*I, The Donor, agree to donate my entire body to The Company. The Company shall have full discretion in regards to the disposition of The Donor's body. In most cases, all viable organs will be harvested and sold on the open market. However, in certain cases, the entire cadaver, or parts thereof, may be donated to universities or research facilities.*

I barely made it out the front door before I began to barf. As I stood there, vomiting all over their sidewalk and myself, two men in scrubs came out the door, walking toward me.

I ran to my car as fast as I could, stomach acid eating away at my throat.

The men ran after me. I didn't know why they were following me, and I didn't want to find out.

I jumped into my car and drove out of there like a maniac. My seat belt hung loose at my shoulder, unbuckled. I shot out of the parking lot, and plowed into the side of a passing garbage truck.

As my body was hurled toward the windshield, headfirst, I knew my fate was sealed. I would soon be joining Mark.

But I was wrong.

---

TWO DAYS LATER, I woke up in a hospital room, bandaged from head to toe.

A cheerful nurse walked into my room. “Oh, wonderful. You’re awake.”

I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“Don’t try to talk right now. Your larynx was damaged in the accident—you know, your voice box. But the doctor did surgery on it, and he said you should be able to talk in a week or so.”

She walked over to the table and pointed to a beautiful arrangement of flowers.

“Did you see these? They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

I tried to nod, but only my eyebrows moved.

“Let’s see who they’re from.” She opened the card. “Oh, isn’t this nice?” She walked over to my bed. “It’s like a credit card. It says: Your first 10 spins are FREE. At DonorLotto.”

My body began to shake—violently.

“Sir? Sir, are you okay?”

No! I was not okay. It all came rushing back to

me:

My buddy, Mark. The game. The B.L.E.E.D.  
machine. The stretcher.

The CONTRACT!!!

THE END

## LAYOFF RUMORS

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AND YOU THOUGHT *your* job sucked. 636 words.

---

“HAVE YOU HEARD?” said Lance.

“What?” said Mary.

“There’s a new owner.”

“So?” said Tony.

“Are you kidding me?” said Lance. “Don’t you



know what that means?”

“No. I just started here.”

“It’s not good,” said Mary.

“Why?” said Tony. “What’s the big deal who the owner is? It’s still the same job, right?”

“Wrong. New owners usually like to clean house—start fresh,” said Lance.

Tony had a blank look on his face.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you, Tony?”

“No, I guess not.” Tony did not appreciate Lance making him look like an idiot in front of Mary. He really liked her. In fact, if the circumstances had been different he would have asked her out. Too bad coworkers could not date.

“Yeah,” said Lance, “we’ve weathered a lot of storms around here, and most of us managed to hang on. But this is different. We’ve got a new owner.”

“But this is my first day,” said Tony. “That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Fair? You think he gives a flip about what’s fair?” said Lance. “You’re just a number to him.

That's all."

Tony wasn't convinced.

"I'm afraid he's right," said Mary.

Lance continued, "I'm telling you, Man, you'll be out of here so fast—you won't even know what hit you."

"That's depressing," said Tony, as it began to sink in. "But why doesn't he just get rid of the old timers—like *that* guy. He looks like he's been here forever."

"Bob? Yeah, Bob's been here longer than most of us have been alive. I don't know what his secret is, but somehow he's managed to stick around. But look at him. This place has just sucked the life out of him."

"Well, this just makes me sick," said Tony. "I really thought I was getting somewhere when I landed this job. And now—to find out it's a dead end..."

"Just accept it," said Mary. "Don't fight it. You're just making yourself miserable."

"I can't help it," said Tony.

"Breathe deeply," said Mary. "Release the stress."

That's what I do. It's not about your situation. It's about how you deal with it."

"Hey, I don't go for that new age stuff," said Lance, "but to each his own. Whatever gets you through the night. Whatever floats your boat. Whatever—"

"—stop!" said Tony. "Enough with the clichés!"

Suddenly everybody got quiet. Something was beginning to rumble. It was getting louder by the second.

"What's that?" said Tony, looking around. "Is it like one of those storms you've lived through?"

"Nope. *That* is the sound of your pink slip," said Lance.

"But I thought—"

"—you thought what?" said Lance. "That you could just walk away from this thing? That you wouldn't be affected like the rest of us? What makes you so special anyway?"

"But it's just a job." His voice began to quiver. "What is that loud noise and why is it getting so dark?"

"This is it," said Mary.

“We’re dead meat,” said Lance.

Tony shouted over the roaring sound. “But I thought the new owner would just let us all go. And then we could go out and get new jobs.”

“You fool!” yelled Lance.

“This can’t be,” said Tony. “How can he just *kill* us?”

Before Lance could answer, he and his coworkers were bombarded by a thunderous tidal wave—sending their frail bodies airborne for a moment before they crashed to the ground.

Their jobs were down the drain—and so were they.

Poor old Bob still clung to the hood ornament. The new owner would have to scrape him off by hand.

A new crop of employees were waiting in the wings. They would begin to come onboard soon—unaware of their certain fate.

And you thought *your* job sucked.

THE END

## RECYCLE MAN

*Copyright © 2010 Robert Burton Robinson*

JANICE LOVES WORKING for the sanitation department because she finds so much perfectly good stuff in other peoples' garbage. 1,018 words.

---

JANICE JUMPED down from the truck and grabbed one of the trash cans. She yanked off the lid and flung it on the ground. The can was fairly heavy, but she

had been manhandling other people's garbage for three years now. No big deal. And thanks to the union, she was finally making a halfway decent wage.

She dumped the contents of the can into the back of the truck and then dropped it on the ground. When she reached for the second can, Janice saw a pile of clothing behind it. When are people gonna learn that we only take what's in the cans? You can't just throw stuff on the ground and expect us to—

But it wasn't clothing. It was a man. His suit was torn and dirty. But she could see that he was somewhat handsome. He appeared to be in his twenties—probably close to her age. “Hey, Buddy?”

He didn't answer.

“You okay?” She walked around and touched his shoulder.

He shrugged, as if to say, “Leave me alone.” Is this guy drunk? At seven o'clock in the morning?

“Just stay right here. Okay? I'll come back and pick you up in few minutes.”

He didn't respond.

Janice walked around to the cab of the truck.

“Hey, Phil.”

Phil didn't hear her. He was busy listening to the radio while devouring his second egg and sausage burrito.

“Phil!”

He turned down the radio. “What?” A little chunk of egg flew past her head.

“I don't feel so good. I need to go home. Could you please call dispatch for me?”

“Harry's not gonna like it.”

“I don't give a crap whether Harry likes it or not. I'm sick, and I need to go home right now. And if Harry don't like it, he can take it up with the union.”

“Well, I'm not gonna tell him. You can do it yourself.”

“Phil, did I ever tell you that you're a major wuss?”

“Bite me, Janice.”

She hopped up on the truck's side step. “Give me the dang mike.”

---

AS JANICE DROVE her old car into the alley, she prayed her mystery man would still be there.

He was.

She open the back door of her car, and went over to help him up. "Let's go get you cleaned up and get some food in you."

"Huh?"

The pungent odor of regurgitated booze nearly took her breath away—which was saying a lot, since she made her living smelling other people's garbage. "Come on. I'll help you."

"You got any beer?"

---

"Now, didn't that hot bath make you feel a lot better?"

"I guess so. I don't really remember."

The bath had made Janice feel a lot better. She had thoroughly enjoyed soaping him up good.

Her ex-boyfriend's jeans and T-shirt fit him quite nicely. Watching him there, sitting at her kitchen table, he looked a little like her ex—only more



handsome.

She delivered plates of bacon, eggs, and toast to the table. "Let's eat."

"I'm starving." He began to gobble it down.

"So, what's your name?"

He seemed puzzled. "I don't know. I was hoping you'd tell me."

"Well, this is a little embarrassing. I don't usually do this."

"What?"

"Sleep with a man before I even know his name. But we really hit it off." She giggled. "We just couldn't keep our hands off each other."

"Really? My memory is foggy. In fact, I can't remember much of anything."

Janice pouted. "You really know how to hurt a girl's feelings. I gave myself to you over and over again last night. You couldn't get enough of me."

"Wow. I'm sorry I don't remember. I'm sure it was great." He thought for a moment. "Maybe I banged my head on the headboard. Or...did we ever fall off the bed?"

Janice nearly choked on her bacon. "Uh, no. I

don't think so. But I can't be sure. It's all a big, wonderful, sexy blur." She smiled seductively.

---

FOR TWO DAYS, Janice had spent every minute with her new boyfriend. It was a dream come true. She hoped he never regained his memory. Although, at some point he was going to have to get a job. She couldn't support both of them on her salary.

When she opened her eyes, she was facing her alarm clock. She hadn't even bother to set it. "Hey, sleepyhead, it's after nine."

No response.

"We should pack a lunch and go out to the park today. People like to go out there and fly kites on Sundays. I've got a couple of cool ones. Sound like fun?"

Still nothing.

She rolled over. "Honey?"

He was gone.

She panicked, running all over the house looking for him. Then she spotted him through the kitchen

window. He was on the sidewalk, talking to some woman in her car.

Janice ran out the front door.

Her man was getting in the woman's car.

She ran as fast as she could, screaming, "Hey! Stop! That's my boyfriend."

The woman sped away.

Janice stood at the curb, crying, as the car faded into the distance. How could he have left me—after all I did for him? We loved each other...didn't we?

She finally turned and walked back toward the house, stopping only to pick up the newspaper.

She tossed the paper on the kitchen table, poured a cup of yesterday's coffee and heated it in the microwave.

Janice hadn't see any news since she found—. Maybe reading the paper would get him off her mind. She sat down and began to peruse it. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the headline, "Son of Local Banker Missing."

John Rich, a local banker, has offered a \$100,000 reward to anyone who locates his son, Bob Rich, who was last seen in a local bar on Thursday night.

He was involved in a fight at the bar, and is believed to have been injured. He might have suffered memory loss.

Janice dropped her coffee cup, threw the newspaper at the wall, and screamed at the top of her lungs. "Crap!"

THE END

CLASSICAL REVENGE

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A WOMAN VENTURES out at night during a snow storm into a dangerous part of town to get the last item on her Christmas list. 2,398 words.

---

AMY TOOK the ring of keys out of the drawer and walked toward the front door.

The door burst open, and a woman rushed in

and pushed the door against the blowing snow until it closed. “If the stupid idiots can’t learn to drive in the snow they need to move out of Cleveland—find themselves a nice warm spot in Miami!” She pulled her hood back, took off the parka, and hung it on the coat rack near the door. Then she saw the ring of keys in Amy’s hand.

“Were you about to close?” She checked her watch. “It’s only six o’clock.”

“Yes. We close at six.”

“Two days before Christmas?”

“It doesn’t matter. Our hours never change.”

“Oh, I understand. It’s because of your location, right? Customers are afraid to come to this part of town after dark.”

Amy locked the deadbolt, ignoring the woman’s comment. “Welcome to Amy’s Classical Guitars. I’m Amy Kilmore.”

“Good to meet you. I’m Luci.”

“So, are you looking for a guitar for yourself? Or is this to be a Christmas gift?”

“For me. Wow, I’ve never seen this many classical guitars in one place.”

“It’s my specialty.”

“So, I guess you don’t get many rockers in here—even though the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is just a few blocks away.”

“Actually, I do get some occasionally. Mostly those who have seen the error of their ways and are converting to classicalism.”

“Classicalism?”

Amy smiled. “That’s what I like to call it. When a guy’s been playing steel strings all his life, and then gets his hands on a great classical guitar—well sometimes he’ll convert—as he should. Because the dynamics, the overtones, and the warmth of the classical guitar are far superior.”

“Steel strings are all I’ve ever played, since I was 14 years old. But I’m considering a classical guitar. So, convert me.”

“Okay. Come on over here and take a seat.”

Luci walked over to the chair and sat down.

“Now put your left foot up on this little stool.” Amy turned and reached for one of the guitars hanging from the wall. She handled it lovingly—as though it was a newborn baby. “Try this one.”

Luci reached into her pocket and pulled out a pick.

Amy frowned. "Oh, no—you don't use a pick. You pluck and strum with your fingers."

"I feel naked without a pick—but I'll try it." Luci formed a G Major chord with her left hand, and strummed with her right thumb. "Nice. Very nice."

"Yeah. See what I mean about the tone?"

"Yes. It's beautiful. What kind of strings are these? Catgut?"

Amy smiled. "No, they're man-made. In fact, those are my own special brand. I give each batch its own unique name. Those are Macho Delights."

"Interesting name."

"Thanks."

Luci hesitated. "They never really made strings from cats, did they?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"Catgut is short for cattle guts. Usually sheep intestines."

"Yuck."

"Most classical guitar strings are nylon these



days. Or a composite material made from synthetic fibers. But you can still buy catgut strings. You can order a set on the web for \$80.”

Luci’s face contorted. “How do they make guitar strings out of intestines?”

“It’s quite a process. They have to remove them from the animal’s body while they’re still warm.

Then they clean and strip them, twist and polish—“

“—gross. I’ve heard enough. So, what’s so special about your strings?”

“If I told you that, I’d have to kill you,” said Amy, stone-faced. Then she laughed. “Just kidding. But it’s a secret process. Amy Strings are only available from me. And I plan to keep it that way, so I can continue to charge \$250 a set.”

“People actually pay \$250 for a set of guitar strings?”

“Sure. These are professional musicians, playing \$5,000 instruments. I get orders from all over the world through my website. In all honesty, I don’t get much walk-in traffic here. The online sales are what keep me going. So, what do you think of that

guitar?"

"It's amazing. How much is it?"

"\$4,500, including the strings."

"Whoa." Luci carefully handed the guitar back to Amy. "That's way too steep for me. Why is it so expensive?"

"Because it's hand-made. Most of these guitars were built by a wonderful old luthier who lives down in LaGrange."

"What's a luthier?"

"A person who makes stringed instruments."

"Well, don't you have anything cheaper?"

"Yes. There on the back wall I've got a couple of Japanese guitars, and a few from Spain. But they're not hand-made."

"That's okay." Luci got up and walked toward the cheap instruments. On her way, she was startled by a cat that was sitting on the counter. It was frozen in place. She looked more closely. "What's this? It looks so real."

"It is real. My 20-year-old son is an amateur taxidermist. When he was 12 years old, his dog died, so we buried it in the back yard. But he couldn't

stand to lose his best friend, so that night he did a little research on the internet. And the next day, he dug up Fluffy and performed his first taxidermy.

It was a mess. Looked like some kind of furry alien. But he's really improved over the years. I've lost track of how many little animals he's killed and stuffed."

"So, he killed this poor little cat?"

"Not on purpose. It kept running into the store every time a customer came in. So, he would shoo it out with a stick. But one day he accidentally whacked it on the head and killed it. Then he asked me if he could stuff it. I didn't see any harm."

Luci walked to the back wall, picked up a guitar, and began to strum it. "Does your husband help you run the store?"

"My husband was killed in a car accident."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She hung the guitar back on the wall. "Wait. I think I read about it in the paper. That's why your name sounded familiar. Wasn't that just a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yes."

Luci walked over to where a stuffed squirrel was

sitting. “Did Casey do this one too?”

“Yes, he did.” Amy wondered how Luci knew her son’s name.

Luci bent down and looked directly into the squirrel’s eyes. “It’s so life-like.” Then she pulled back, as though she wasn’t absolutely sure it was dead.

“Yes, he’s getting really good at it.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me asking—are you sure your husband was actually in the car when it went over the cliff? I read that they never found his body.”

“All I know is, we were having our annual Christmas party with twenty of his old college buddies and their wives, when Carl realized we were running out of beer. So, he drove the Mustang down to the 7-Eleven to get more. But when he came back, he raced up our driveway, plowed through the backyard fence and went over the fifty-foot cliff—right into Lake Erie. The police think the accelerator got stuck, or that maybe Carl was drunk, and he thought he was stepping on the brake. I was visiting with some of the women, and didn’t even know he

was gone.”

“I read that the top was down on the car. Why would he put the top down in twenty degree weather?”

“Because he thought it made him look cool. I told him, ‘Carl, you’re 40 years old—you don’t look cool anymore, no matter what you’re driving.’ But he’d do it anyway—especially when he’d been drinking.”

“Well, maybe he survived somehow,” said Luci.

“We’re clinging to that hope. But it’s been two weeks, so... I can’t believe I’m discussing this with a total stranger. I haven’t opened up to anybody about the accident until now.”

“Well, I’m glad I could help you get it off your chest.”

“Kinda makes me want to share something else with you.”

“Like what?”

Amy grinned. “Like how I make my \$250 guitar strings.”

“Oh, that’s okay.”

“But I really want to show you. Come on.”

Luci reluctantly followed her around the counter

and through the door. "Smells funny back here."

"Yeah. It's the mold. I've got to take care of that soon. But you get used to it after a few minutes." Amy opened another door and led Luci inside a large room with no windows.

There was a small lamp sitting on a work bench. But Luci's eyes were drawn to the round table in the middle of the room. A dim light bulb suspended above the table barely illuminated four men playing poker.

"Carl!" Luci ran toward the table. "Carl, you're alive! Why didn't you call me, Honey?"

Thank you, thought Amy. She reached into the workbench drawer for the pistol and then began to walk toward Luci. Now I know for sure that you're The One.

"Carl?" Luci screamed. Then she turned to Amy. "What have you done? You killed him! And then you let that freak Casey stuff him! Well, you're not gonna get away with it! Do you know who I am?"

Amy raised the pistol and pointed it at Luci. "I didn't know who you were when you first came in. But now I do. You're the bumbling police detective

who shot the Mayor's brother-in-law in the arm."

"I was just doing my job. It looked like he was about to attack the mayor."

"Too bad they put you on desk duty and took away your gun. It would have come in handy right about now, huh?"

"Why did you kill Carl? I was in love with him."

"That's why. Because he was having an affair with you. And I had warned him after his last fling that if he ever did it again, I would kill him. Apparently, he didn't believe me."

"So, you set the whole thing up? Ran his car off the cliff? Was he even in the car?"

"No. Casey called him while he was at the 7-Eleven and told him our van had stalled in a nearby dark, empty parking lot. When Carl came to help, Casey hit him over the head with a pipe wrench and killed him. Then he threw his body into the back of the van.

"He tossed several big blocks of ice into the Mustang and drove it back to the house. Carl's buddies had moved their cars to the street to give him a clear path down the driveway.

“Casey got out of the car and moved the ice blocks to the driver’s side of the floorboard, depressing the accelerator. Everybody inside the house heard the screeching tires and the roaring engine, and rushed outside to see what was happening. One of the guys made it out the door just in time to see the Mustang going over the cliff.

“It was a daring plan. If the car had veered off to one side or the other...but it didn’t. I was so proud of Casey.”

Luci sobbed. “You didn’t have to kill him! Why didn’t you just divorce him?”

“Because he would have wanted half of my business—even though he never lifted a finger to help me run it.”

“So, he wasn’t even in the car when it went into the lake.”

“That’s right. And the ice blocks just floated away, leaving no evidence of foul play. Brilliant, huh?”

“What are you going to do with me? Surely you’re not going to kill me—I’m a cop. My car’s sitting out front. And what would you do with my



body?"

"Well, let's see...the car's no problem. It'll be stolen before midnight, and chopped into spare parts by morning. You see, this neighborhood does have its advantages. And, as far as what to do with your body...I'm sure I'll think of something. But don't worry—only the best will do for my husband's lover."

"No, no. I was in love with him—I don't deny that. But we were just friends."

"So, you weren't lovers?"

"No, not at all. We just spent a lot of time talking."

"In hotel rooms."

"Yes."

"I see."

Luci felt that Amy might not shoot her as long as they kept talking. "Why did you kill these other men?"

"I needed the raw material."

"Raw material?"

"For my strings."

"You said your strings were man-made!"

Amy gave Luci a sinister grin.

“You killed these men just so you could make guitar strings?”

“Sure. These men and many others. I told you I make most of my money through online sales. Why do you think I bother with walk-in traffic?”

“To get raw material? What did you do with the rest of the bodies?”

“We just flush them down into the sewer system. Pretty easy—if you have a commercial meat grinder. And it’s a shame, really. The typical candidate is a loner that nobody particularly likes or understands. Once I had put that first guy out of his misery, I did a little experimenting and discovered what wonderful strings I could make. Practically overnight, I had a real business. So, that’s why my strings sound so good.” She raised the pistol, ready to fire. “And now I’m going to enjoy the sound of you dying.”

“Wait. The people in the store next door will hear the gunshot. You can’t shoot me in here.”

“Good point.” Amy lowered the gun.

Luci relaxed a little bit. Maybe she really could

talk her way out of this mess.

She didn't hear Casey sneaking up behind her.

---

CASEY LISTENED, as his mother played the Bach arrangement on her guitar. When she finished, he said, "That sounds amazing, Mom. What do you plan to name this batch of strings?"

She handed him a freshly printed string box label, and he read the name.

Amy Strings – Luci nell'anima.

Casey said, "What language is this?"

"It's Italian. It means 'Shine your light into the soul.'"

"That's beautiful."

"Thanks." Amy turned her head. "What do you think, Luci?"

Luci didn't respond.

Casey said, "From the look on her face, I'd say she approves."

Luci sat at the poker table, motionless, smiling at her lover, Carl.

THE END

## CONTRACT FOR LOIS

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A BITTER DISPUTE with her employer results in a new contract for Lois. 1,181 words.

---

LOIS PULLED into the handicap parking spot closest to the main doors. It was Tuesday night, and this was her usual trip to Charlie's Big Box for milk, eggs, and other staples.

She locked her car and walked toward the main entrance, pulling the hood over her head to avoid the frigid wind.

Two high school girls hurried past her, giggling. Lois saw one of them take an mp3 player out of her coat pocket. The other girl had something in her hand too. They were headed for an old panel van.

She went after them, limping due to the pain in her back.

“Who do you think you’re fooling, Girls? They’ve got security camera all over the store.”

The girls walked faster. The side door of the van opened and they jumped in.

Lois reached the van huffing and puffing. Her back was beginning to throb. She banged. “Open this door.”

The door slid open and two young men reached out and grabbed her. One was wearing a Harry Potter mask. The other looked like Dumbledore. They pulled her inside and shut the door.

“You’re only making it worse,” she said calmly. “I’m trying to help you. Believe me—it’s not worth it. You don’t want to live a life of crime. It may seem

glamorous on TV, but—”

“—shut up, Old Woman,” said one of the men.

The two girls climbed up to the front passenger seat and went out the door.

Dumbledore hopped into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

“Don’t be a fool, Young Man,” said Lois. “If you drive away, this is an abduction. Do you want to go to prison? Release me right now, and we can forget all about this.”

“But you won’t forget, Lois,” said the the man in the Harry Potter mask.

“How do you know my name?”

“Oh, I know all about you, Lois.” He turned and shouted to his buddy. “Let’s go.”

“You apparently don’t know enough about me,” she said. “I’m the senior Loss Prevention Tech at this store—been here for ten years. I’ve seen plenty of punks like you come and go—mostly to jail.”

“I wouldn’t worry so much about where I’m going, Lady.”

The van drove out of the parking lot.

After a couple of minutes, Lois said, “What’s

your name?"

"Potter. Harry Potter. Haven't you've heard of me? I'm a wizard." He whipped out a pistol. "And this is my magic wand." He laughed.

Dumbledore laughed too.

"Very funny," she said. "It's good that you two have a sense of humor. You're gonna need that in prison."

"Shut up." He backhanded her in the face.

She grimaced.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, mocking her. "Did that hurt your back? Because I know you've had two surgeries on it. But you won't have to worry with that anymore." He took out a black handkerchief and blindfolded her.

"Why would you want to hurt me? I mean, what's in it for you?"

"A new van," said Dumbledore, laughing.

"Shut up, Man," said Harry.

"Is this where we turn—Franklin Avenue?" said Dumbledore.

"Don't tell her where were going, you idiot. That's the point of the blindfold."



“It’s not gonna matter when she’s dead.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “that’s true.”

---

HARRY and his partner walked into Charlie’s office. Charlie was sitting at his desk eating a pizza.

“Well?” said Charlie, “did you do it?”

“You mean, did we kill her?” said Harry.

Charlie waved his arms frantically. “Don’t say that. Somebody out there might hear you.”

“Sorry,” said Harry.

“And shut the door,” said Charlie.

“I’ve got it.” It was a woman’s voice.

Charlie cringed.

Harry and his buddy separated, revealing Lois, who stepped inside and closed the door.

“Did you really think you could get away with it, Charlie?” said Lois.

Charlie was stunned.

“We won’t take up much of your time,” said Lois. “We know you’re busy running your store. So as soon as you pay us what you owe us, we’ll get

out of your hair.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” said Charlie.

“Yes, you do,” said Lois, “and you’ve done everything you can to avoid paying up. It was a workplace accident, and I haven’t been able to come back to work. You owe me two-hundred-thousand dollars—minimum. And I happen to know that you keep a large amount of cash in your safe.”

“Not two-hundred-thousand,” said Charlie.

“Fine,” said Lois, “then I’ll take whatever you’ve got as a down payment.”

“No,” said Charlie.

“No?” said Lois. She nodded to Harry.

Harry pulled out his pistol and pointed it at Charlie.

“So this is the thanks I get for giving you a job?” said Charlie to Harry.

“You haven’t paid us yet,” said Harry.

“You didn’t do the job,” said Charlie, pointing at Lois. “But you still can.”

“Harry and I have a deal,” said Lois. “I’m gonna pay him for doing nothing. Now get the money out of the safe.”

Charlie got up slowly and went to his safe. "You're crazy, Lois." He unlocked the safe and opened it.

"All of it," said Lois.

Charlie spun around with a gun in his hand.

Lois kicked him in the face.

The gun discharged, the bullet barely missing her. The silencer muted the sound of the shot. Lois figured it was unlikely that anyone outside the office heard it.

She snatched the pistol from Charlie's hand. "You're more stupid than I thought, Charlie," said Lois. "Now put all the cash on the desk." She raked her arm across the desk, knocking his pizza box and Pepsi can to the floor.

Charlie gathered up all the money from the safe and placed it on his desk.

Harry's eye bulged at the sight of the cash. "Now we're talking," he said, grinning.

Lois yanked down a cloth shopping bag that was proudly attached to the wall for display purposes: Charlie's Big Box – where everything is bigger and cheaper. "Fill 'er up, please." She threw

the bag at Charlie.

He began to put the cash into the bag. "I'm sorry about your back, Lois—really. I should have covered your expenses sooner."

"Right," said Lois, "and what about my pain and suffering?"

"Yes, of course, that too." He put the last stack of cash into the bag.

Lois picked it up.

"So are we good?" said Charlie.

"Well, let me think." Lois turned the gun on Harry. "Sorry, Son."

Harry couldn't seem to comprehend what was about to happen.

Lois put a bullet through the center of his heart.

He collapsed without firing a shot.

His buddy went for the door.

She dropped him with a shot to the back of the head.

"What a shame," said Lois, turning to Charlie.

"No—wait!" Charlie held up both hands.

"You know, there's something you forgot about me," said Lois, picking up the bag of money. "It's

the reason you hired me ten years ago.”

“What’s that?” said Charlie, shaking.

Lois nailed him right between the eyes. “That I’m a bad-ass.”

She walked out.

THE END

## DRIVING THE GALAXIE

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IT'S ALWAYS a special trip when Charles drives his mom around in her classic 1964 Ford Galaxie sedan. 979 words.

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CHARLES WAVED AT HIS NEIGHBOR, Henry, as he walked across his porch and down the stairs. His mother was sitting in the passenger seat of her 1964

Ford Galaxie. She had already moved over so Charles could drive. They always had their best conversations while riding around in her car. And now that Charles had been laid off from work, the drives had become a daily activity.

Charles opened the driver's door and got in. "Good afternoon, Mom." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"How are you holding up, Charles?"

"I'm fine." He put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway.

"Are you sure? Because I'll be happy to loan you some money if you need it."

He desperately needed money, but there was no way he would take any of hers. She was on a fixed income, so giving him money would force her to go without essentials—like food.

He smiled. "Remember when I first got my license and you started letting me drive us to church every Sunday?"

"Yeah, that first Sunday I was a nervous wreck. You nearly hit the preacher on the way out of the parking lot."

Charles laughed. "It wasn't funny at the time, but now it cracks me up. And what I couldn't believe was that you let me drive again the very next week."

"Pastor John thought I was nuts. He threatened to call the police."

"Really? You never told me that."

"Oh, he was just kidding."

"I understand now why you risked your life letting me drive to church. You just wanted to make sure I went. As I recall, I was sort of losing interest at the time."

She smiled. "And it worked...for a while."

"It sure did." Charles turned the corner. "This baby always drove so smooth."

"It's still a great car. That's why I've kept it all these years."

"Remember that time you told me to just get in the car and start driving? You wouldn't tell me where we were going. But I finally figured out that we were headed for the lake."

"That day was a disaster." She laughed.

"You thought I would enjoy sitting out there



fishing with you all day.”

“I completely miscalculated that one.”

“I did want to go to the lake, but I didn’t want to spend all day fishing with my mother.”

“You wanted to be with your friends.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t want to disappoint you, so I tried to play along.”

“And after all that fishing, we went home with nothing.”

“Except a sunburn.”

“I was sorry I ruined your whole Saturday.”

“You didn’t ruin it.”

“I didn’t?”

“No. I mean, I might have thought so back then, but...it turned out to be a day I’d always remember.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it was kinda special. I just wasn’t smart enough to realize it at the time.”

“You were smart enough—you just weren’t mature enough.” She smiled.

“Well, I’m mature now. A little too mature for my liking.”

“We all get there eventually, Son.”

His cell phone rang.

“Excuse me, Mom. I’d better take this.”

“Well, then pull over to the side of the road. It’s not safe to—”

“—I know, Mom.” He pulled over and stopped.

“Hello?...Yes, this is he...I know my payment’s late, but I lost my job and...fine, I’ll see what I can do. Goodbye.”

“You do need help.”

“No, Mom, I’ll be okay. I’ll have another job soon. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Yes, I do. A mother always worries about her children—no matter how old they are.”

Charles drove back onto the road.

“Oh, Charles, why didn’t you tell me you were in trouble?”

“I’m okay.”

“I have a solution.”

“No, Mom, I will not take your money.”

“I’m going to give you my car. They tell me it’s worth at least ten-thousand dollars.”

“Easily—but I’m not taking it.”

“Look—I don’t need a car anymore. When I need to go somewhere, which isn’t that often these days, you can take me in your car. Deal?”

“No. Thank you for being willing to do it, Mom. I really do appreciate it, but I cannot take your car.”

Charles pulled the car into his driveway. “I enjoyed our drive, Mom. I always do.”

“Me too, Son.”

He kissed her goodbye and went into the house.

Five minutes later, he came back out. The car was still sitting there in the back yard. He could probably get twenty-thousand for it. But he’d never sell—no matter how long it took him to find a job.

He opened the driver’s door and got in. “I’m back.”

“It’s about time,” she said, smiling. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Aw, come on, give me a hint.”

“Okay.” He thought for a moment. “I’ve got some things in the trunk that we’ll be using when we get to our destination.”

“How many things?”

“Two.”

“Are they the same kind of things?”

“You’re asking too many questions.”

“Well?”

“Yes.”

“Are they fishing poles?”

“Mom.”

“Are we going to the lake?”

“Now you’ve spoiled the surprise. I’ll have to come up with something else.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Charles grinned.

His neighbor, Henry, was watching out of the corner of his eye while he worked in his garden. He had complained when Charles had first parked the old car in his back yard a year earlier. And he thought his neighbor had lost his mind when he first saw him sitting in the car talking to himself.

Charles had been unemployed for over two months, and Henry figured his neighbor would eventually sell his mom’s car to help pay his overdue bills. But as he watched Charles laughing and pretending to drive the old car, he finally

understood why that would never happen.

THE END

NURSE JEAN

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JEAN TAKES extraordinary measures to prove to her four grandsons that she is not boring. 1,104 words.

---

JEAN KNOCKED on the door and opened it. “Ray, the boys want you to take them to the ballpark.”

Ray looked up from his computer. “Why don’t you take them, Honey? I’ve got to get our taxes

paid.”

“They don’t want me to take them. I’m too boring—don’t you know? They don’t like hanging around with me. They want their grandfather—he’s cool.”

“Oh, Jean, you’re not boring. Tell them one of your hospital horror stories. Everybody gets a kick out of your Nurse Jean stories.”

She closed the door and went back out to the living room. The four boys were sprawled out across the couch watching TV.

“Well?” said Paul, perking up, “Is he going to take us?”

“He can’t,” said Jean, “your grandfather is very busy right now.”

“Aw, Man,” said John.

“I told you,” said Pete.

“Shut up,” said John.

“I knew it was gonna be boring here,” said George. “I could have watched TV at home.”

“Yeah, except your mom doesn’t trust you to stay home by yourself,” said Paul.

“Ain’t that the same reason your here?” said

George.

“Alright, alright, you guys—quit your arguing,” said Jean. “How about if I take you to the ballpark?”

The boys looked at each other.

“That’s okay, Grandma,” said Paul. “We’ll wait until Grandpa can take us.”

The other boys agreed.

“Hey, I could tell you a story,” said Jean, “but it might be too scary for you.” She sat in a chair across from them, picked up the remote, and turned off the TV.

“Is this a story about when you were a nurse?” said Pete.

“Yes. It’s about the time a man came into the ER with half his arm chewed off.”

“Oh,” said John, sounding like a robot, “I remember that one. His hand got stuck and he couldn’t get it out, so he finally chewed it off.”

“Yeah, that was a gross one, Grandma,” said George, in monotone.

“Yeah, really scary, Grandma,” said Paul, with his head leaned back on the couch, about to dose off.

“I’m sure you had a lot of freaky experiences as a



nurse, Grandma,” said Pete.

“And apparently you boys have heard about them all,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess so,” said George.

“Do you miss being a nurse?” said Pete.

She appreciated Pete’s attempt to show interest in her. “Sometimes I do.”

Nobody seemed to know what else to say.

Finally, John said, “Grandma, would mind turning the TV back on?”

She picked up the remote and turned the TV on. Then she turned it off.

“Grandma.” said Pete.

“I’ve got something more exciting than TV,” she said. “You boys are going to enjoy this—IF your stomachs can handle it. But I don’t know...it could be a problem,” she said studying them. “You might barf.”

They all sat up.

“No, we won’t,” said John. “What is it?”

She stood up. “Come with me.”

The four boys followed her down the stairs to the basement. “Over here,” she said, leading them to a

locked door. She pulled her necklace up and out of her blouse, revealing a silver key at the end of it. They had never seen that key before. "Now, Boys, this is my own private room. You are never to go in here without my permission."

They all shook their heads in anticipation.

She unlocked the door and pushed it wide open. The utter darkness of the doorway that stood before them sent a chill down their young spines. Was it simply a entrance into an ordinary room? Or was the first step a never-ending drop into a black abyss of razor-sharp knives and swords?

Jean reached in and flipped a switch, and a 25-watt bulb glowed to life near the ceiling. They boys were relieved to see a floor. But the low lighting made the room look creepy.

"Come over here, Boys."

They walked behind her, closely huddled together.

"Have you ever seen loose eyeballs?"

"Loose?" said Pete.

She opened a cabinet door and took out a sealed bottle. "Check out these peepers," she said, setting

the bottle on the counter.

“Those aren’t real...are they?” said Pete.

“Come closer,” said Jean. “See for yourself.”

Pete stepped up to the counter. “I don’t know. It’s so dark in here.”

Jean reached for something at the back of the counter—a flashlight. She clicked it on. The two eyeballs were staring straight at Pete.

“Whoa,” he jumped back. “Those things are real.”

“No they’re not,” said John. “Let me see.” He eased in closer. “Yuck.” He backed up.

“Okay, Grandma, that’s pretty creepy,” said George. “Now, what else you got?”

She opened another cabinet, took out a bigger bottle and set it down on the counter. “How about a heart?”

“Where did you get that?” said Paul. “Off some guy in the morgue?”

She didn’t answer.

“That could be a cow’s heart for all we know,” said John. “It’s no big deal.”

Without a word, Jean opened another cabinet.

When she set the big bottle on the counter and shined the flashlight on it, Pete yelled, "It's a guy's head." He puked all over himself.

"I'm outta here," said George running out of the room.

The others tore out after him, chasing him up the stairway.

Their grandfather was standing at the top of the stairs. "You boys ready to go?" I'll finish the taxes later."

"Definitely," said John.

"Okay," said Ray, "let me just grab a quick sandwich and—"

"—no, please, Grandpa," said George, "we need to go right now."

The boys ran out to Ray's truck and piled in. He followed them.

As they drove past the neighbor's house, one of the boys noticed the police tape across the front door. "What going on there, Grandpa?"

"Our neighbor, Mr. Fredericks, is missing," said Ray. "The police think...somebody murdered him."

The boys looked at each other in horror.

---

NURSE JEAN HAD STAYED downstairs in her private room. She wondered if her grandsons still thought she was boring.

She gently stroked the side of the large bottle containing the head. "My name is Jean, and I will be your nurse for this evening."

Opening a drawer, she took out the small poster. Very flattering, she thought. If your face had to be on a missing persons flyer, it was comforting to know they had used a nice picture of you.

She pointed the flashlight at the head, and then at the flyer. "See, Mr. Fredericks? It's a lovely picture of you. Don't you think?"

Nurse Jean smiled. She wasn't boring at all.

THE END

9 MINUTES TO 1960

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SUE'S ROAD to a new job takes a strange detour. 1,234 words.

---

SUE ERICKSON SAT in her living room staring at the front window, waiting for her ride. She was nervous about her first day on the new job. She had relocated to Texas from Reno, Nevada, and still wasn't sure

she'd made the right decision—which was probably what kept her up half the night.

A bolt of lightning shot across the sky, startling her. It was seven o'clock. Where was her ride? She hated having to depend on someone else to get her to work on time.

Finally, a late model, light blue Cadillac Eldorado pulled into her driveway. She hurried out the door and got into the car just as it began to rain.

"Thanks so much for the ride, Betty. My car should be out of the shop by this afternoon."

"Happy to do it anytime," said Betty, backing out of the driveway. "So, how are you liking Magnolia?"

"It's a nice town. We used to come here and visit my aunt and uncle when I was a kid."

"Well, they must have thought a lot of you."

"Yeah, I was shocked when I found out they left me their house."

Betty turned onto FM 1488.

"What are all these FM roads?" said Sue. "What does FM stand for?"

"Farm-to-Market. I think we're the only state that

has them. They built them years ago, so the farmers would have a way to get their crops to town. I don't imagine people even think about that anymore. Most of the time we leave off the FM. Like this road. Most folks just call it 1488."

After a few minutes Betty exited to Interstate 45 South.

Sue felt her foot begin to tap the floorboard. She forced herself stop.

"We'll make it on time." Betty pointed to the electric billboard above the highway. "Look. It updates every few minutes."

Sue read the sign aloud. "Nine minutes to 1960. That's our exit."

"Feel better now?"

"Yeah, a little," said Sue, smiling. "You know, it's sort of funny."

"Funny? What do you mean?"

"The sign said, 'Nine minutes to 1960.'"

"That's right—we're almost there."

"No. I mean it makes us sound like time travelers. Nine minutes to 1960. Like it's telling us we're about to arrive in the year 1960."



“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

“Oh, goodness,” said Betty. “I’m gonna have to stop for gas.”

“But that will make us late.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s your first day and you want to make a good impression, but I’m sure your boss will understand. Besides, you’re going to be really late if we run out of gas.”

“It’s okay,” said Sue. “I appreciate you giving me the ride.”

“And here’s our exit.” Betty took the 1960 off ramp.

“I’ll just swing by this convenience store. It’ll just take a minute.” She pulled up to a pump. “Oh, Honey, would you mind running in and buying a box of donuts. I just remembered it’s my turn to bring breakfast.” She pulled a ten out of her purse and handed it to Sue.

“Sure.” She got out of the car and went into the store, deciding to grab a diet Coke for herself while she was at it.

Glancing at the shelves as she walked to the

back, Sue noticed products she'd never seen in Nevada. She did a double-take when she saw a sign advertising a half gallon of ice cream for seventy-nine cents. Now that's a Texas-sized sale, she thought.

Sue smiled when she spotted rows of the familiar Coca-Cola logo. She opened the cooler door and reached in. Interesting, she thought—they carry quite a selection of the vintage-style bottles, even the 6.5 ounce.

A young man wearing an apron walked by.

“Sir?”

He stopped and turned back to her. “Were you talking to me, Ma’am?”

“Yes. Could you help me, please?”

“Certainly, Ma’am.”

What a well-manner young man, she thought. How refreshing. “Where is your Diet Coke?”

“My what?”

“Diet Coke.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, I’ve never heard of that product.”

“You’re kidding me. You don’t carry Diet Coke?”

“Oh, wait.”

“I thought so.”

He opened the adjacent door. “Here you go.” He handed her a bottle.

“Tab? What’s this?”

“It’s like Coke, but without calories. It’s a diet cola.”

Sue was afraid to ask, but she had to know. “How much is it?”

“Thirteen cents.”

Sue began to tremble as she handed the bottle back to him.

“Are you okay, Lady?”

She ran out of the store, praying that everything would be okay once she got back into the car.

The car was gone.

All of the cars in the parking lot were old models—yet they didn’t look old. It was like a classic car convention.

“Did you get the donuts?” a woman shouted.

It was Betty’s voice. Sue spotted her standing behind a light blue 1959 Cadillac Eldorado. The back fins were enormous.

Sue ran to Betty. "I'm sorry. They were out of donuts."

"Oh, darn."

"Betty, would you mind driving me back home? I'm not feeling well."

"Are you sure, Honey? You really want to miss your first day?"

"I just can't do it. I'm sick."

"Okay, sure, I'll take you home, Honey. Get in."

Betty made a U-turn and got back on I-45. "You're not gonna throw up, are you?"

"I don't think so. I just need to lie down. I'm feeling dizzy."

"Lean your seat back and take it easy. Use those electric controls on the side of your seat."

"Okay, thanks."

Sue was beginning to relax when she saw another electric billboard. "No, not again. I can't take any more of this."

"What?"

"The sign. Read the sign," she said, pointing.

"Four minutes to 1488."

"It's happening again. Look over there—on the

other side of the highway. Is that a horse and carriage?"

"Huh? Where? I can't tell. It's raining too hard."

"We're going further back in time. 1960 was bad enough—but 1488!? I can't survive in the year 1488."

"What on earth are you talking about, Sue?"

"I can't. I just can't do it. I can't!!!"

Lightning struck the car and Sue fainted.

She heard a knocking sound and her eyelids popped open. She was sitting in her living room.

"Sue? Are you in there?"

It was Betty at the front door.

Sue opened the door.

"Well, are you ready for your first day?"

"That depends. Do you have plenty of gas in your car?"

"I just filled up. Why?"

"Did you remember the donuts?"

"Yep. I already picked them up—three dozen glazed. Hey—how did you know about the donuts?"

"I feel like I've already made this trip once this morning. But this time everything is gonna be okay."

It's gonna be a great first day. Let's go."

"I love your positive attitude, Sue," said Betty, as they hurried to the car through the rain. "But we may be just a little late getting to the office."

They got into the car.

"Why?"

"There was a major accident on I-45, so we're gonna have to go around the back way," said Betty.

"The back way? On one of those Farm-to-Market roads?" Sue held her breath.

"Yeah, that's right. But it's not far—it's only about two minutes to 2978."

Sue gasped, "I can't breathe."

"Oh, you'll be fine. Have a donut."

THE END

PARTY CLOWN

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A DISGRUNTLED BUSINESS partner plans to get his revenge at a surprise birthday party. 1,148 words.

---

NEIL STEPPED IN CLOSE. "Do I make you nervous?" he said, puffing rancid cigarette smoke into Jessie's face. "You've never spent much time around ex-cons have you?"

“No.” Jessie had never spent much time in dark alleys either.

“So do you have a job for me or what?”

The guy certainly didn’t look like a cop. But Jessie would be careful, just in case. “Yes. Friday night at my business partner’s house. His wife is throwing him a big surprise birthday party. I want to give him a little surprise of my own—right in front of all his friends and family.”

“Some special...entertainment?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like fun.” He lit up another cigarette. “I’ll need ten thousand in small bills.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

Neil offered a sly grin. “Hey, if you’d rather hire somebody else, be my guest. But it could really spoil the party if they don’t know what they’re doing. Things could get...messy.”

He thought for a moment. “No—I can’t take that chance. It’s got to be done right.”

“Smart man.”

Jessie reached into his suit coat pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. “Here’s the address.



Come at around eight. I'll be there, of course. Nobody will ever suspect that I'm the one who hired you."

"Right."

"But he's got two young kids, so be careful. Actually, they're my kids...and my wife."

"The son of bitch stole your family?"

"Yeah. And now he's trying to force me out of the company. We built that business together. Screw him!"

"Sounds like you've got anger issues, Man."

"You think?"

"Maybe you should surprise him yourself."

"I'm not really a hands-on kind of guy."

"Good. I need the work."

"I can see that—which is why I think you'll be happy to lower your price to five thousand."

Neil raised his right hand.

Even in the dim lighting of the alley Jessie could see the shiny six-inch blade. Before he could react, Neil pinned him to the wall with his left arm.

"You whiny little bitch. No wonder your wife left you. How about I cut your giblets out and feed them

to the rats?”

Jessie couldn't speak. He couldn't feel anything—except the warm urine gushing down his leg.

“You've hired me to do a job, and the job's gonna get done. There's no turning back now. No price reductions. So shut the hell up.”

Jessie gulped.

“Tomorrow night at 10:00, you're gonna come back here with the money. And Friday night, your partner is gonna get an amazing surprise.”

Neil punched Jessie in the stomach and walked away.

---

JESSIE SIPPED HIS PUNCH. “This is a great party, Cathy.”

“Only the best for my Jack.”

His smile nearly cracked. If he was half a man, he would tell her off. “I don't think he suspected a thing.”

“Yeah, it's amazing that nobody let it slip.”

“Hey, was that the doorbell?”

Cathy went to the front door.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, walking into the house.  
“Now, where’s our birthday boy?”

Cathy followed him. “Sir, I think you’ve got the wrong house. I didn’t hire a clown.”

Ignoring Cathy, he addressed the crowded room of adults, who were standing around chatting, drinking punch, and eating cake. “Okay now kiddies, where’s Jack?”

One of the men laughed and said, “Can’t you tell? He’s the one over there, wearing the purple party hat.”

The clown reached into one of his huge pockets as he walked toward Jack.

Jessie moved in for a better view.

The clown whipped out something—a red balloon. He blew it up and twisted it in just the right places to form a hat. With the second balloon, a yellow one, he added a gold band. “A crown for the king—I mean the birthday boy,” he said, placing it on Jack’s head.

Everyone laughed.

Cathy surveyed the room of guests, and seemed

to wondering who had hired him.

The clown leaned in to Jack, thrusting out his chest, positioning the fake flower on his lapel directly in front of Jack's face.

Then Jessie realized it was Neil—the ex-con he'd hired for ten-thousand dollars.

The clown squeezed the little red ball in his hand, and water sprayed out of the fake flower into Jack's face.

The crowd roared with laughter.

After creating balloon toys for the two children and various hats and necklaces for the adults, the clown made a grand exit, waving goodbye with all the gusto of St. Nick. Jessie almost expected to hear: Merry Christmas to all, and to all a goodnight.

Then he was gone—even more quickly than he had appeared.

Jessie kept his eye on Jack. Perhaps Neil had spiked the flower water with acid or some other deadly liquid. Soon it would begin to take its toll on poor old Jack.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Jack appeared to be just fine. He had another piece of cake and a

cup of coffee.

Jessie excused himself and left the party.

---

JESSIE THREW BACK another shot of whiskey. “Keep them coming,” he said to the bartender.

A familiar voice from behind him said, “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

Jessie spun around and nearly fell off his stool. “You bastard,” he slurred.

Neil sat down beside him. “What’s your problem?”

“I paid you a lot of money to do that job.”

“And I did it well, don’t you think? They loved me.”

“Sure. You were a great clown. The balloon art was amazing. Just fabulous, you son of a bitch.”

“What are you so upset about? You paid a premium price for a premium job. You could not have found a better party clown. Admit it.”

Jessie stood up, dizzy from the alcohol. “I didn’t pay you to be a frigging party clown.”

“You didn’t?”

“You know damn well I didn’t.”

“Then exactly what did you expect me to do for that money?”

“You know.”

“Obviously I don’t.”

“Don’t give me that. I hired you to give Jack a big surprise. We both knew what we were really talking about. I mean, come on—you’re an ex-con.”

“So, instead of my clown act, you were expecting me to...”

“Yes. I was expecting you to kill him. I wanted to see you blow that bastard away—right in front of everybody.”

“So the money you paid me was not for entertainment. You were hiring me to kill your business partner.”

“How could you be so stupid. Of course that’s what I was doing. Idiot.”

Neil got off of his stool. “Jessie, you have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right—”

“—wait. What’s happening?”

Neil took out his cuffs.

“You’re a cop?”

“Anything you say can, and will, be used against you in a—”

“—son of a bitch!”

“Now who’s the clown?”

THE END

MAGIC TEA

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A YOUNG BUSINESSMAN will do anything to satisfy his desperate need for sleep. 1,333 words.

---

HE PASSED the place every day on his way to work. But he never thought he would actually stop there. It was for the strange, hippie people. Not for a normal, thirty-six year-old executive like Jeremy.



Madam Nowall – Psychic Therapy. The sign was big enough to be seen from outer space. And why not? Aliens probably needed psychics too.

Stepping out of his car, Jeremy felt like an alien. Strangers passing by were, no doubt, judging him as weird, if not crazy. Friends and family would be even less sympathetic.

He checked his watch: 12:15 p.m. He would have preferred coming at night, but oddly, Madam Nowall closed at 2:00 p.m. Hopefully, this would not take longer than his lunch hour.

Judy, one of the secretaries, had noticed that Jeremy seemed troubled, and offered him Madam Nowall's card. Yoga Judy. Incense Judy. Strange Judy.

Still, if doing this psychic thing could help his sleep problems, it would be well worth the ridicule of his co-workers.

Jeremy wasn't sure whether to knock or just open the door. Before he could decide, the door opened.

"Please come in, Sir."

The woman was not at all what he had expected.

She was a very young, petite Chinese woman. In a lovely blue silk dress, embroidered with pink flowers. Her shiny black hair hung just above her shoulders. Her porcelain white face was flawless. By impulse, Jeremy's eyes went to her ring finger. No wedding ring.

Her English was broken, with a strong accent. But he had no trouble understanding her.

"Please have seat." She showed him to a comfy-looking leather chair. She sat down in a matching chair, directly in front of him. "I have made tea for you."

He saw the cup sitting on the small table next to his chair. "Thank you." Jeremy picked up the cup. "But how did you..."

"How I know you come?"

"Yeah."

She smiled warmly. "I know many thing."

He took a sip of his tea. "Delicious. What is it? Oolong?"

"No. It my own special blend. I call Magic Tea."

"Really?" He almost snickered. But her intense eyes made him take her seriously.

“You here because cannot sleep.”

“How did you...never mind.” He figured Judy had given her a heads up. “That’s right. For a couple of months now I’ve had the problem. I toss and turn all night. And the over-the-counter sleep medicines I’ve tried didn’t help at all. I was about to go to a sleep specialist—”

“—but you come to me instead. Very wise.”

“Thank you.” He drank more of his tea. It tasted better with each sip.

“How you feel?”

“Better than I’ve felt all day. Relaxed. Kinda sleepy.”

“That good.”

“But I want to sleep tonight—in my bed. I don’t want to fall asleep here.” He finished off his tea.

“Just relax. Everything be okay.”

Those were the last words Jeremy heard before he drifted off.

When he woke up, he checked his watch. It was nearly 6 p.m. More than five hours had passed!

“Madam Nowall?”

She walked out from the back. “Good. You

awake now.”

“I can’t believe I slept for so long. I’m embarrassed. Did I snore?” He checked the corners of his mouth for drool.

“No. You very quiet. I think you sleep well.”

“That’s amazing. I can’t remember when I’ve slept that well.” He stood up. “How much do I owe you?” He pulled out his wallet.

“Two hundred dollar.”

He had come with cash, per Judy’s advice. “And how much for some of that Magic Tea?”

“Ten dollar a bag.”

Jeremy was puzzled. “You mean ten dollars a box.”

She smiled politely. “No. Ten dollar a bag. Only need one bag each night.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s outrageous.” He took two one-hundred dollar bills out of his wallet and handed them to her. “Thanks for your help. But I think I’m fine now. I don’t need any high-priced tea.”

“Very well.” She bowed.

---

JEREMY GOT under the covers and turned off the lamp. To his surprise, he was sleepy—even after the long nap in Madam Nowall’s office. He was right. He didn’t need the tea. It was Friday night. He would sleep in tomorrow morning.

Before long, Jeremy began to dream...

The man slipped into the bank wearing a disguise and walked up to a teller. He placed a money bag on the counter. “Empty your drawer. And don’t make any stupid moves.” He showed her the pistol under his jacket.

As the teller carried out his orders, a sweat broke out on her forehead. “That’s everything.”

“Thanks.” He picked up the bag and casually walked toward the front door.

A guard spotted him. “Sir?”

He whipped out his pistol and fired.

The guard went down.

He walked out of the bank, and down the sidewalk to his car. Pulling off his mask, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror.

Jeremy woke up screaming. “No, that wasn’t me! I didn’t do that!” What a horrible dream. His sheets were moist with sweat.

He wondered if Madam Nowall was open on Saturday.

---

“COME IN, JEREMY.”

“I’ve got a problem.”

“Nightmares.”

“Yes.”

“You need Magic Tea.”

Jeremy had not dreamed anything while sleeping in Madam Nowall’s office. “How does the tea help with nightmares? How does it work?”

“Magic Tea make you forget.”

“Forget what?”

She hesitated. “You steal money. You kill man.”

“No. That was a dream.” Jeremy gulped. “How did you know about my dream?”

“No dream. You really do it. I go to back room while you sleep. I come out, you gone—in car.”

“You’re telling me that I sleep-walked a bank robbery?”

“Yes.”

“Then where’s the gun...and the money? I don’t even own a gun.”

“I take care of money and gun. No evidence. I protect you.”

Jeremy was speechless.

“Nobody ever know. You wear mask.”

“This is nuts. I should go to the police.”

“Okay. But you go to jail—for long, long time.”

Jeremy pondered the seriousness of the situation.  
“But I’ll never sleep again.”

“Yes, you will. I lie. You not rob bank.” She smiled.

“Why did you tell me I did it? You scared me half to death.”

She did not respond.

“But...if it was just a dream, how did you know what I dreamt?”

“Yesterday, while you sleep, I have radio on. Listen to news. Reporter say about bank robbery. You hear while sleeping.”

Jeremy breathed a sigh of relief. "So, I'm okay. It was just a nightmare—because of hearing the radio while I was sleeping. I don't need the tea."

"Yes, you do. To help you forget bad thing you do."

"What bad thing?"

She hesitated.

"Tell me. What bad thing?"

"You hit man with car. You don't stop to help."

Jeremy's face turned pale. "How did you know about that? It was on a country road. Nobody saw. I didn't tell anybody. And anyway, he was okay. He didn't die."

"He not die. But he in wheelchair. He never walk again—because you not go back, call for help. Someone find him much later. Too late for doctor to save leg."

Jeremy's eyes began to well up. "I know. I should have stopped."

"Now you live with it. That why you can't sleep."

Jeremy hung his head.

"That why you need Magic Tea. It help you



forget.”

He bought ten bags.

---

MADAM NOWALL BECAME like a drug dealer to Jeremy. Occasionally, he would try to stop using the tea. But the nightmares always returned. Either the one where he ran over a man, or the one where he robbed a bank and killed the guard.

The authorities had never been able to track down that bank robber. Although, the lead detective was reportedly getting close.

But Jeremy now leads a normal, happy life. And will continue to do so as long as he has his MAGIC TEA.

THE END

## RESOLUTION

*Copyright © 2011 Robert Burton Robinson*

A NEW YEAR'S resolution is not always a good thing.  
1,185 words.

---

REGINALD HELD up his wine glass. "To the lovely dinner you've prepared, my dear Kimberly."

"Well, most of the credit goes to Alfred, of course. But I helped." She smiled and held up her

wine glass. "In celebration of another year well spent in your company, my sweet husband."

"How do you like the wine," he said.

"An excellent choice."

He set down his glass and began to cut his roast beef. "Thanks for agreeing to this quiet dinner at home."

"It was a great idea, Honey. This is such a nice change from the hustle and bustle of the typical New Year's Eve parties we attend."

"Yes, it is." Reginald swallowed. "This roast beef is simply magnificent."

"Thank you."

"And I would like to start a new tradition: each of us shall announce our resolutions on New Year's Eve."

"But, Dear, isn't that considered bad luck?"

"That's what they say. But I say they're wrong. Now, would you like to go first?"

"Well, since it is your idea, I think you should go first."

"Very well. My resolution for the new year is...to KILL YOU."

Kimberly's smile morphed into an evil grin. "Really? Well, my resolution is to KILL YOU."

"And how to you propose to commit this heinous act? Do you have a gun? Or perhaps you think you can strangle me with your bare hands. Come now, My Dear, you don't have it in you."

"But you do."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was in the roast beef. The poison."

"You poisoned me?" He began to laugh.

"You think this is funny? You're going to be dead in ten minutes. Then we'll see how funny it is."

"Where did you get the poison? From Alfred?"

Kimberly's chin dropped. "You poisoned me too?"

"It was in the wine."

"God, no!"

"But he gave me the antidote—in case I accidentally drank from the wrong glass." He rushed to the china cabinet and opened a drawer. "Where is it? You took it." He turned to glare at Kimberly, who was no longer at the table.

She was rummaging through the hutch, on the

opposite wall. "Mine's gone too. Shit! Now what am I going to do?"

Reginald checked his watch. "We've got eight minutes."

Kimberly grabbed her stomach. "I'm already... feeling...sick." She collapsed to the hardwood floor.

"That bastard. Why did we trust him?"

"Why did you put him in our will? Idiot!"

"He's been with us for fifteen years. He's like family."

"Yeah. Family that wants to kill you."

"Dammit." Reginald's knees gave way and he fell to the floor.

The dining room door swung open and Alfred walked in, sipping tea from one of Kimberly's heirloom China cups. As their butler, he knew those cups were never to be used. "Oh, my. What's the matter with you two?"

Reginald screamed at him with a hoarse voice. "We're dying, you son of a bitch!"

"But this is what you wanted—to kill each other. I just helped you do it."

Kimberly said, "I told you he couldn't be

trusted.”

“Oh, how the mighty have fallen.” Alfred walked in closer. “Now I’ll never have to hear your petty complaints again. I’ll never have to drive you to your pedicures or spas or dinner parties. I’ll never again be forced to—” Alfred’s cup slipped off his finger and fell to the floor, shattering.

Reginald looked up. “What’s the matter, Alfred? Feeling weak?”

“My stomach...is cramping.” His legs gave way, and his knees hit the floor, the bone crunching against the hardwood.

“Well,” said Reginald, “I’m sorry to hear that.” His voice sounded stronger.

“Yes,” said Kimberly, “that’s a shame.” She stood up.

Alfred watched her in disbelief.

Reginald stood up and brushed off his slacks. “This floor is dusty, Alfred. I’m very disappointed in your work.”

Alfred rolled onto the floor and looked up at them. “But...how?”

“Well, you see,” said Reginald, “I wanted to add

you to our will. But Kimberly was concerned.”

“That’s right,” said Kimberly. “I didn’t trust you, Alfred. We know all about your gambling problem.”

“So,” said Reginald, “we decided to test your loyalty. We began to argue regularly. And the fights became more bitter each day. We wanted to convince you that we hated each other.”

“Then,” said Kimberly, “I asked for your help. And when I told you I wanted to kill Reginald, you were quick to tell me you could obtain an undetectable poison for the job. You also promised me an antidote—just in case I accidentally took some of the poison.”

“And you were more than happy to offer the same help to me,” said Reginald. “You suggested that I poison Kimberly’s wine. And you told Kimberly she should poison my roast beef. You knew that we had hidden our bottles of antidote in the dining room.”

“So, said Kimberly, “you stole the antidote, thinking we would both die, leaving you our entire estate.”

Alfred struggled to speak. “You didn’t poison

each other? It was all an act?"

"Pretty good acting, huh?"

"I think we're ready for Hollywood," said Kimberly.

"We knew you would celebrate our demise with a cup of your special tea. And just in case you decided to poison us yourself..." He reached into his pocket and took out a small bottle. "The bottles you stole from our hiding places had water in them."

Alfred's shaky finger pointed to the bottle in Reginald's hand. "Please...give me the antidote. Please, I beg you. I'll do anything."

"Gee, I don't know, Alfred. What do you think, Honey?"

Kimberly shook her head.

"Actually," said Reginald, "I'm surprised you didn't notice that your beloved tea leaves were a bit moist tonight."

Alfred tried to speak.

Reginald bent over and cupped his ear. "What's that, Old Man?"

Alfred coughed and forced himself to speak. "You'll go to prison for this."



Reginald and Kimberly laughed.

Kimberly said, “No, we won’t. You’re the one who bought the poison.”

“And your suicide won’t be a surprise, really,” said Reginald. “I’ve been telling my poker buddies for weeks that you’ve been depressed lately.”

The dining room door burst open and two large men stepped in. “Is this the home of Alfred Smith—the butler?”

“How dare you break into my house,” said Reginald.

One of the men saw Alfred lying on the floor, and pulled a pistol. “Is that him?”

Reginald and Kimberly stepped back.

“Yes,” said Reginald, “that’s him.”

The two men walked over to Alfred.

The man with the gun said, “Alfred Smith, this is for non-payment of debt—\$250,000 to be exact.” He aimed the gun at his head.

“No, please,” said Alfred, holding up his trembling hand.

Reginald and Kimberly leaned back against the wall, frozen in fear.

The man fired a single shot into Alfred's forehead. Then he quickly turned and nailed Reginald with two rapid-fire rounds to the heart, followed by two for Kimberly.

As the men walked out, one of them said, "So, have you got any New Year's resolutions?"

"Nah. I'm good."

"Yeah, me too."

THE END

SCREEN 13

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THE NEW GIRL working at the local cinema suspects foul play among her fellow employees. 1,272 words.

---

JESSICA TOOK the man's ticket, tore it, and handed him the stub. "Screen 13. To the right, around the corner, and all the way at the end."

Why had Jessica told the man to go to Screen 13?

wondered Debbie. It was only her first week at Jefferson Cinema, but even she knew there was no Screen 13.

She followed the man at a distance.

Turning the corner, Debbie saw him reach the end of the hall. He would soon be confused and upset. She would apologize for Jessica's mistake and lead him to the correct screen.

The man opened the door and walked inside.

Oh no, she thought. The man had just walked into a storage room.

Debbie hurried to the door, and pulled the handle. It was locked. She looked up at the electric sign over the door, which was dark, as usual. She knocked.

No response.

Zach walked out of Screen 12, which was directly across the hall. "Hey, Debbie, wanna go get a burger tonight after work?"

"What's the deal with this screen, Zach?"

"That's not a screen. Didn't they teach you that during orientation?"

"Sure. But—"

“—the new owner is superstitious. He doesn't like having a screen number 13.”

“I know. But a man just went in there.”

“A guest? No, couldn't have been.”

“Jessica sent him down here. She told him his movie was playing on Screen 13. I heard her.”

“She must have been daydreaming. She knows better. Probably had one too many beers last night.”

“Maybe so. But they guy went in there. I saw him.”

Zach tried the door. “How? It's locked.”

“I know. But I saw him go in.”

Zach knocked on the door and they waited for a while.

There was no response.

Zach shrugged. “How about that burger?”

“Not tonight.”

“Okay, then. Tomorrow night. Great. Can't wait.”

“Zach?”

He walked away.

Debbie checked the door throughout the night, but it remained locked. She never saw the man come

out.

---

THE NEXT NIGHT, Debbie listened carefully every time she was near a ticket taker. Finally she heard Jessica direct a middle-aged woman to Screen 13. She began to follow the woman. But after only a few steps, another guest stopped her.

“Can you please help me?” the man said.

“Of course.” Debbie smiled. But she needed to give a quick answer. The woman was getting away.

“I stopped to get popcorn and my wife went on to get our seats. She has the ticket stubs. And I forgot which screen she told me. But I don’t want to have to search all twenty-five screens to find it.”

Twenty-four screens, thought Debbie. She helped him, and then hurried to catch up with the Screen 13 woman.

Debbie saw her at the end of the corridor. The woman looked up at the sign over the door.

Debbie was amazed to see the sign lit up.

The woman opened the door and walked into the

theater.

Debbie walked faster.

As soon as the door closed behind the woman, the sign over the door went dark.

Debbie was practically running now. What in the hell is going on here?

When she reached the door, it was locked.

“Hey, Debbie, can you give us a hand with this trash?”

She turned around. It was Zach and Henry.

“Sure.” She walked over and helped them roll the three large trash cans toward the exit to the alley.

When they got outside, Zach flipped up the dumpster lid.

“Yuck, that stinks,” said Debbie.

“What did you expect?” said Henry.

“I don’t know,” she said. “The smell of stale popcorn, half-eaten candy and pickles, I guess. But this smells like...Zach, do have a flashlight?”

“Yeah.” He handed it to Debbie and she flicked it on and directed its beam into the dumpster. “What is that?”

Zach took a look. “What?”

“That red liquid.”

He shrugged.

“Looks like blood,” she said. “Smells like blood.”

“Vampire barf,” said Henry.

The two boys laughed.

“This is not funny,” she said.

“What’s the big deal?” said Zach.

“She thinks somebody was murdered,” said Henry. “Ooh. Creepy.” He laughed.

“Oh, I know,” said Zach. “Some guy was probably throwing a fit because his popcorn was too salty. So, the manager slit his throat.”

“Yeah,” said Henry, “or maybe his pickle wasn’t quite big enough.”

“Hey, if a guy’s pickle is too small, it ain’t our fault,” said Zach.

The boys laughed.

“You guys are so funny.”

“Ah, come on, Debbie,” said Zach. “If it is blood, it’s probably from the chicken wings. You know—we sell them in the snack bar.”

---



LATER, Debbie walked down to Screen 13 again to take another look.

“Debbie?”

She whipped around. Jessica was in her face. Debbie jumped back.

“Is there a problem?”

“No. Why?”

“You keep coming down here. You seem to be obsessed with this storage room.” She looked around to make sure nobody else was near. “You want to know why I sometimes send guests down here to Screen 13?”

“Uh...”

“Of course you do. I’ll show you.” Jessica took out a key, unlocked the door, and opened it for Debbie. “Come on in.”

Debbie walked inside. Jessica followed her.

“I can’t see where I going,” said Debbie.

“Just keep moving forward.”

Finally Debbie saw a faint light. Several people stood behind a small table which held a cake. With candles.

“Happy Birthday, Debbie,” said Jessica.

“But my birthday is not until—”

“—I know. We’re celebrating early.”

“So, that’s why you send people in here? For a surprise birthday party?”

“Yes,” said Jessica. “We find people who live alone and don’t have any family or friends. We mail them a free movie ticket, and then we surprise them with a birthday cake.”

Just as Debbie started to relax, she spotted a black blanket draped over something in the corner. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed that there was a shoe sticking out from under the blanket.

Hopefully it didn’t have a dead foot in it.

But what if it did? What if they were luring people into the theater—people that nobody would ever miss—killing them, and selling their body parts? That would explain the blood in the dumpster.

Those poor, lonely people.

But wait—she didn’t have any real friends. Her grandmother was her only family. And she had run away from home several times. Would anybody even come looking for her this time?

“Cut out the heart first?” The large knife in the man’s hand reflected candlelight into her eyes, blinding her.

Debbie knew she couldn’t possibly get away. She was dead meat. “Go ahead. Do it.”

The man looked puzzled. “Okay.” He turned around and cut a huge chunk out of the cake, including the heart made of thick, red icing. “Here you go. Happy Birthday.” He handed the plate to Debbie, smiling.

Zach jumped up from where he was hiding: under the black blanket in the corner.

Everyone began to sing “Happy Birthday.” By the end of the song, tears were streaming down Debbie’s face. It was her best birthday party ever.

---

DEBBIE WOULD NEVER AGAIN WORRY about Screen 13. When she saw someone go in, she knew the door would lock behind them. She pictured them being treated to a wonderful birthday surprise.

She would never tell anyone about Screen 13, as

she had promised. The secret was safe with her. To the rest of the world, it was just a storage room.

But she would never know what really happens to those lonely people who accept a very special invitation...to Screen 13.

THE END

APRIL'S FOOL

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A TEENAGE GIRL'S mean prank backfires. 793 words.

---

“JUST CAME IN TODAY, HUH?”

“Yeah.”

“Murder?”

“Yep.”

“Husband?”

“How did you guess?”

The old woman grinned. “Well, one look told me you ain’t from the street. So, it had to be either the husband or the boyfriend.” She spit on the ground. “Bastards. What did he do to you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Good. I’ve got plenty of time, Honey. And so do you.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath and exhaled. “It all started one day during my senior year in high school.

.....

“Does everybody have a date for the dance?” I said.

“Johnny asked me last night,” said Jennifer.

“I wanted to go with him,” said Heather.

“What are talking about, Heather?” I said. “You’re going steady with Andy.”

“I know. But Johnny could have asked me anyway. I might have said yes.”

“Really?” I said. “Mind if I share that with Andy?”

“Don’t you dare,” said Heather.

We laughed at Heather. April just ate her lunch and listened. She never said much. April wasn't cool enough to be part of our group, but we encouraged her to sit with us at the lunch table so we could make fun of her. She never seemed to mind.

"What about you, April?" I said. "Who are you going with?"

She shrugged.

"Nobody's asked you yet?" I said.

"No," she said. "I'm not really interested. I don't know how to dance anyway."

"Anybody can slow dance," I said.

The other girls agreed.

"You just kind of walk around hugging," I said. "Wouldn't you enjoy some hot guy rubbing up against you all over the dance floor?"

April blushed.

"It feels good," I said. "Right, Heather?"

"Why are asking me?" said Heather.

"Because you're going steady," I said. "You and Andy must rub yourselves together all the time."

The other girls giggled.

"So, April, if none of the boys are man enough to

ask you out, then you should just ask one of them.”

“I don’t think so,” said April.

“Why not?” I said. “What could it hurt?”

April hesitated. “I don’t know...”

“How about Harry?” I said, knowing he would turn her down flat. He was one of the hottest guys in school.

Jennifer elbowed me. She knew I wanted to go to the dance with Harry.

“I do like Harry,” said April. “He’s nice.”

“Don’t you mean smoking hot?” said Heather.

“Well, there you go,” I said. “You like Harry, so ask him to the dance.”

“I wouldn’t know how,” said April. “I get too nervous around boys.”

“Yeah,” said Jennifer, giving me the evil eye, “she gets too nervous around boys. Just leave her alone.”

But I wouldn’t give up. “You know what you need, April? An icebreaker.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need something to get a conversation started with Harry. Wait—I know. You could give



him a copy of that poem you wrote. You know—the one you read in class yesterday.”

It was sweet and syrupy—almost gooey. The lamest piece of poetry I had ever heard.

“Yeah,” I said, “you should give him a copy. Put his name on it, like you wrote it just for him. You could slip it into his locker. And then, after he’s had a chance to read, you could ask him to the dance. I’m sure he would be so moved by your lovely poem that he would jump at the chance to be your date.”

“Well, actually, I did write it for him.”

I nearly lost my lunch. It would be such a perfect prank. April would be humiliated.

We huddled together in the hallway as we normally did between classes and pretended to be gossiping while watching April approach Harry at his locker.

Harry held up the paper with April’s poem on it. I had suggested that she douse it with perfume—something really potent.

None of us could read their lips or hear anything they were saying. But when she turned around, we saw tears running down her face. She hurried right

past us without a word. We laughed our butts off.

.....

The old woman said, "So, Harry asked you to the dance instead, you ended up marrying him, and he beat the hell out of you until you finally killed him."

"No. Harry married April."

"But I thought—"

"—when we saw April crying in the hallway that day—those were tears of joy. Harry had asked her to the dance because of that crappy poem. It made her so happy that she started crying. Harry should have been mine. Instead, I ended up with Jake. Harry was my one true love."

"But you lost him because your prank backfired."

"Yeah. I tried to make a fool out of April, but instead I made myself April's Fool."

THE END

DREAMING DEBRA

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DEBRA WAS the girl of his dream life. He only wished she were the girl of his real life. 923 words.

---

“WAKE UP, SLEEPYHEAD.”

What a nice dream, I thought. Face to face with a beautiful woman—in bed. Her blonde hair glowed, backlit by the morning sun.

“You promised me a picnic today, and it’s nearly 11:00.”

Wait. I knew this woman. It was Debra—from high school. I had a huge crush on her, but I never asked her out. Too shy. Then I noticed her wedding ring. I glanced at my left hand. Yes! Matching rings.

She placed her soft hand on my shoulder and smiled. “Last night was wonderful.”

Oh, my God. We had made love last night? I tried to remember it. How could I forget it?! Don’t overreact, I thought. Be cool. Don’t wake yourself up. This is too good. “Yes, it was, Baby. Fantastic.”

“Well, let’s get going. We can pack the lunch together. It’ll be fun.”

Great, I thought. I’m all in. But my body felt heavy. I couldn’t move. My eyes began to close.

“Honey?”

I couldn’t help it. I was falling asleep. No! I don’t want to...

I have no idea how long I was asleep. But when I felt myself waking up, I began to get excited. The picnic. With my beautiful wife, Debra. My eyes were open, but everything looked blurry.

“Finally. I thought you’d never wake up.”

Debra’s voice sounded funny—like she suddenly got a bad cold. When my vision cleared, I was shocked to see—a man. A bum in ragged clothing lying in bed with me. All at once I inhaled his rancid breath, and recoiled in disgust. “Who are you? And where’s Debra?”

“Great. Now you don’t even know my name. We’ve been together for nearly a year, and you don’t even know who I am. That’s pathetic, man.”

I wanted to kick him out of my bed. Or find a pistol or call the police. But I couldn’t do any of those things. I couldn’t move. And my eyes were closing.

The next time, I was afraid to open my eyes. But the sweet fragrance in the air gave me hope.

“Hey, Baby. You’re not trying to back out on our picnic, are you?”

My eyes popped open. There she was. Just as before. “Of course, not, Sweetie.” This time I would not fall back to sleep. I hopped out of bed. “I’m ready to go.”

“Okay. But you might want to get dressed first.”

“Right.”

“It’s gonna be a perfect day,” she said.

“Yes, it is.” I walked into the bathroom, so happy to be awake. To be walking around. I was good now. And this was not a dream. It was real. What a life.

Then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked kinda funny. My skin looked soft. I rubbed my hand across my face. Why was it so smooth? Where were my morning whiskers? And when had I let my hair grow so long?

I turned on the light to get a better look. I had breasts! “No!”

“What’s the matter, Honey?”

“I’m a woman!”

“And you just now realized it?”

I don’t know whether I fell back to sleep or fainted. But I awoke to something hitting the bottom of my foot. The bottom of my shoe. Why was I wearing shoes in bed?

Then I realized I wasn’t in bed. I was lying in an alley next to a dumpster.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled bills. The man bent down and

took the money out of my hand, and replaced it with a small baggie. I held it up to my eyes. Drugs?

Was this my real life? Sleeping on cold concrete in a stinky alley with my fellow druggies? No wife, no home, no bed?

The man grinned at me. "Enjoy."

"No!" I threw the baggie at him. "Get away from me!"

Suddenly, my body was sucked up into a tornado, and then abruptly spit out. At least that's what it felt like. I was dizzy, disoriented.

The young guy leaned in. "Be cool, man. No problem." He put the baggie into his jacket pocket and walked away.

I looked around and thought, what is this place? My head began to clear. It was my high school prom. Wait. Now it was coming back to me. Earlier that night I had taken some pills. I got them from that guy—the one who just offered me the baggie. Some of the cool guys were doing it, so I thought, why not? How stupid. I decided it was time for me to go home.

I turned around and bumped into a girl, causing

her to spill her glass of punch. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," she said, checking her dress. "I don't think any of it got on me."

When she looked up, I got a lump in my throat. It was Debra. I felt my face turn red.

She put her hand on my arm and smiled at me. "Really. It's okay."

It was now or never. "Hey...you want to..."

"...dance?"

What I was doing? Every kid in the room was probably watching—seeing me make a fool of myself.

"Sure," she said.

And that one word changed my life forever.

---

"WAKE UP, SLEEPYHEAD."

I opened my eyes to see my beautiful wife, Debra, lying in bed with me.

"You promised me a picnic today."

Five years ago I dreamed this scene. It was exactly like this.



I grinned. "And a picnic you shall have, Baby."

THE END

MAN DOWN, ANTE UP

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REVENGE IS SWEET. Unless it comes back to bite you.  
1,039 words.

---

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING? Come back here! Hey!”

What a chump he was. Phil had paid fifty bucks to be stripped naked, tied to the bedposts, and —nothing!

How was he going to get himself untied?

Then he heard the front door open. Sure—she'd probably gone out to her car for some equipment. A whip or something. He'd never tried that, but he was certainly open to experimentation. "Where did you go, Honey? I missed you."

He watched the doorway for his sexy, young hooker. But instead, his business partner appeared.

"Ed. What the hell are you doing here?"

Ed grinned. "Having a little fun, Phil?"

"I don't want you here tonight."

"I can see that." Ed continued to grin at Phil as he studied his old buddy's out of shape body.

"What are you looking at? You're fatter than me!"

"Why did you do it, Phil? I trusted you."

"What are you talking about? What did I do? Steal your hooker?"

"I don't need hookers, Phil."

"Of course not. You've got a gorgeous young bride—half your age."

"Yes, I do."

"But when's the last time you—"

“—shut up, Phil. Just shut your stinking mouth!”

“The truth hurts, don’t it?”

“You stole from me, Phil. You’ve been robbing me blind.”

“What?!”

“Don’t deny it, man. You’ve been cooking the books. Did you think I’d never notice?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Just this year alone you’ve stolen \$40,000.”

“What!? Are you out of your mind, Ed? Look around. Does it look like I’ve got any extra money?”

“Probably spent it on gambling—or hookers.”

“You know I don’t gamble. And I’ve never hired a hooker before. Not until tonight. In fact, she approached me—at the bar. Wait—that was you, wasn’t it? You paid her to set me up—to come here and tie me up like this.”

“And you fell for it, you idiot.” Ed chuckled.

“Fine. I’m an idiot. But I didn’t steal any money. I would never do that.”

“Right, Phil. I believe you,” he said facetiously.

“Have you talked to your dear wife about this?”

“Oh, so now you’re gonna try to shift the blame

to Rachel? How dare you!”

“Did you even ask her about it?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Why not? She’s the bookkeeper. It would be easy for her to manipulate the numbers.”

“If you say another word about Rachel—”

“—what? You’re gonna kill me?”

Ed stared at him, but didn’t speak a word. This made Phil nervous.

Finally, Ed said, “You need to take better care of your yard, Phil.”

Phil was confused by the sudden change of subject.

“Fire ants are overtaking your entire yard. They’ve built a huge mound against your bedroom wall. Right about there,” he said, pointing.

“So?”

“Fire ants can be deadly, Phil. Did you know that?”

“I know it hurts when they sting you.” He would play along with Ed’s crazy line of thought. Hopefully, Ed would get bored after a while, and untie him.

“Yeah. Did you know that when a calf is born, if a fire ant stings him while he’s on the ground and he doesn’t get up right away, he could be a goner?”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. I read about it. When that one fire ant stings the calf, it gives off pheromones that attract the rest of the colony. In no time at all, the calf is completely covered with ants. And those hundreds of stings eventually overpower the poor animal’s immune system.”

“You read too much, Ed. Now, untie me.”

“Fire ants are very resourceful, Phil. Did you know that if it floods, the ants band together to form a raft?”

“You’re making this stuff up.”

“No. It’s true. And the raft carries the queen ant to safety. It’s amazing.”

“Yeah, Ed. Amazing. Now, come on.”

“You know, I’ll bet that colony of ants right there outside this wall could easily make its way inside if it had a good reason.” He walked out of the room.

“Where are you going? Come on, Ed, you’ve had your fun. Untie me.”

Ed walked back in, carrying a five-gallon bucket. He removed the lid and began to sprinkle its contents near the wall. "What we need is a nice little trail."

"What is that?" Phil was afraid to hear the answer.

"Why, it's fire ants, of course," he said with delight, as he continued to create a trail of dirt and fire ants across the floor and onto the bed.

"Stop it! Stop it, Ed! Okay, okay! I'll admit to whatever you want! Yes, I stole the money! It was me—so call the police!"

"Too late for that, Phil." He poured the remainder of the dirt and ants on top of Phil's bare crotch.

"No! No!" Phil began to thrust his midsection up and down, sending much of the dirt into the air.

Ed jumped back to avoid the airborne ants. "It's no use, Phil."

"Please! Ouch! They're biting me! Please cut me loose!"

Ed calmly put the lid back on the top of the bucket and walked out of the room with it, as his

former friend began to scream. There were no other homes close by. Nobody would hear.

He walked out of the house and down the sidewalk toward his car. Would he get away with it? Probably. The small town sheriff was a good friend. And Phil had no family.

Ed's only contact with the hooker had been via throwaway cell phone and two hundred in cash, left in Phil's mailbox.

Ed smiled. It had been so easy.

The one thing he had not anticipated was the bullet. The one that caught his left temple.

Ed fell to the ground, bleeding. But he didn't die immediately. He lay paralyzed, head resting on a large mound of soft dirt.

No, he thought. It couldn't be. Please, no!

An angry fire ant stung his lip. The pain was excruciating. But worse than that was the realization that hundreds, if not thousands, of ants would soon attack his nose, his eyelids, his ears—everything!

And as he died in agony, he understood. His old buddy had not betrayed him.

Rachel! How could you?!



THE END